

**THE HOUSE
OF SHADOWS**

REGINALD J. FARRER

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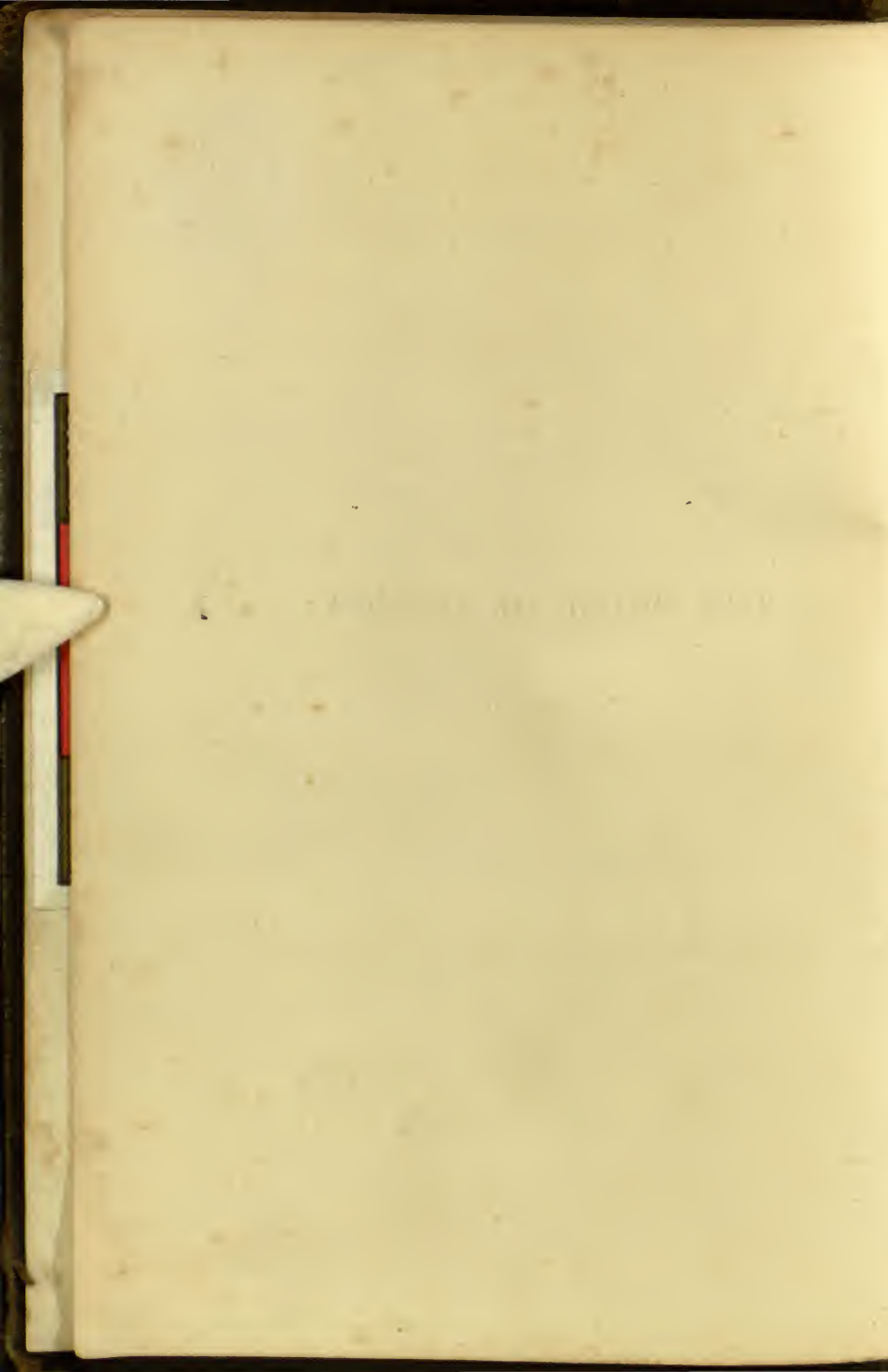
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THE HOUSE OF SHADOWS

HOUSE OF COMMONS

REPORT OF THE

COMMISSIONERS OF THE

LAND OFFICE

IN RESPONSE TO A RESOLUTION
PASSED BY THE HOUSE OF COMMONS
ON THE 14TH DAY OF MARCH 1866

1866

THE
HOUSE OF SHADOWS

BY
REGINALD J. FARRER

AUTHOR OF 'THE GARDEN OF ASIA'

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TO
MY COUSINS
FLORA AND MIRANDA

THE HOUSE OF SHADOWS

CHAPTER I

THE long, low room lay in a breathless and attentive hush. A green twilight filled it, for the French blinds were drawn down before each of the five windows, and only a dazzling streak of radiance at their base showed that the garden and the world outside lay basking in the oppressive glory of a cloudless afternoon in late August. So tense and ominous was the silence in the darkened room, that faint, far-away sounds of bleating sheep filtered into the stillness with the distinctness of small voices near at hand. In the great carved bed against the further wall a sick woman watched the piercing beams of light that shot beneath the green barriers, and realized the heartless beauty of that outer world.

When winds are blowing and rain descending in steady downpour it is not so hard to leave a place one loves, a place where one has known happiness. But when the sun shines heartlessly down on our departure, and everything looks more beautiful than ever it did before, then parting becomes doubly bitter. Storm and thunders might mitigate our regret over the paradise from which we are going, but untroubled brilliance emphasizes unbearably all the beauties and delights from which we are being hurried on our journey.

And Mrs. Ladon of Ottemer was going on a long journey indeed—a journey whose bourne is wrapped in darkness, a journey whose loneliness no friend avails to console, no maid nor courier to facilitate. Indeed it was cruel of the world to make itself so beautiful for just this one day of all days. It might so easily have been dull, or rained, and then she would not have minded quite as much.

In that great sombre room, in that great sombre bed, she made a poor little ephemeral speck, the tiny woman who was so near extinction. In her lifetime Elena Ladon had been of almost uncanny prettiness—very dainty and doll-like, with rolling waves of black hair, and an Italian's essential beauty of deep, mysterious, dark eyes. Unlike many women's, her appearance harmonized with her history. She had always seemed a fairy-like creature, too exquisite for the turmoils and tragedies of life, and the turmoils and tragedies of life had completely passed her by. She had lived in laughter and enjoyment—a being of infinite gaiety, without care for the morrow, or, indeed, much thought of any kind. All who crossed her path had found her perfectly radiant, perfectly incapable of seriousness or sorrow. Then Tempest Ladon, fresh from Oxford, had come to Rome, and fallen headlong in love with her. After due delays she married him light-heartedly. His existence thenceforth had been a continual honeymoon. He found his Italian wife the most adorable creature that the world could possibly hold—the very incarnation of gaiety and charm and the whole enjoyment of life. And now, after three years of marriage, Elena Ladon was dying.

With practised softness of step the nurse turned the door-handle and entered quietly. Trained to a deft silence of movement, she advanced noiselessly across the floor, thinking her patient asleep. A brisk atmosphere of

disinfectants swirled across the room with her, eddying among the odours of narcotics with which the air was heavy. She began to rearrange the medicine-bottles on the table by the bedside. Then she saw that Mrs. Ladon was awake.

‘Can I get you anything?’ she asked, seeing a question in the great deep eyes.

‘I should like the blinds drawn up,’ answered Elena.

An acquiescence in all an invalid’s requests is the first homage paid by good Samaritans to approaching Death. Often it is by the gratification of their whims that the sick pathetically learn that they will soon be dead. The nurse gently drew up the five green blinds. Instantly the room was filled with a clamorous blast of light. The whole air was golden. The earthly day was drawing towards its close in almost unimaginable splendour. Incredible, indeed, to the sick woman seemed for an instant the notion of the Eternal Night into which she was passing. The air was so warm, so radiant, so refulgent. Was it possible that she was set apart from all the visible world in a halo of thickening, impenetrable darkness? Naturally Elena died in the faith of her Church, but at such primitive moments as these the soul turns rather towards its primitive instincts than towards the fancies of theology. Death for an instant seemed very phantasmal and impossible to Elena. Then a spasm of pain that passed into a dull throb recalled her to what was going forward.

‘Are you feeling easier?’ inquired the attendant softly. She had left her patient half an hour before, sleeping after a severe attack of pain.

‘Nurse,’ inquired Mrs. Ladon in a weakening voice.

‘Yes, dear? What is it?’

‘Nurse, I suppose that when people are—dying, they sometimes say things they don’t mean—nonsense. Have I ever talked nonsense, nurse?’

'Sometimes you have wandered a little, but that is what often happens. You must not let that worry you. No one hears, and if anyone did, no one would take any notice.'

'Tell me, please—what have I said? Please tell me.'

'Nothing that I can remember,' said the nurse, experienced in the mournful diplomacy of death-beds. It was her part to soothe, not to trouble, the departing soul.

'Oh, but I must have said something,' answered Elena, a dim fear flickering into the depths of her eyes as she turned her head on the pillow. 'Do, please, try and remember the kind of things I said. I do want to hear.'

But nurse knew the correct answer.

'Oh, for the most part you talked about Mr. Ladon and your little son, and how happy they were together.'

'Did I say nothing else about the child, nurse—nothing else at all?'

'Nothing whatever, as far as I can recollect,' answered the kindly woman, smoothing the pillow.

Elena heaved a little sigh, and lay still. Silence hung heavy in the room while the other moved softly from place to place, setting things to rights. Elena's face grew fixed in endurance as the slow seconds limped past.

'Nurse,' she said at length.

The woman turned in vague alarm at the tension of Mrs. Ladon's tone. Then she saw. The sick woman's two hands lay firmly clenched upon the coverlid. Her lips were tight set and her great eyes distended, full of unnatural fire. The experienced attendant understood.

'Has it come on again?' she gently asked. 'Will you take something?'

'Oh, so bad, so bad,' murmured Elena, as if to herself. Then, starting into vigour: 'No, no! it's no use giving me things. I must not take them. Nurse, nurse, it's getting dreadful—dreadful! Oh, nurse, promise me——'

The other bent over her.

‘Yes, dear, what shall I promise you? I will do anything if it makes you easier.’

‘Nurse,’ whispered Elena, ‘if I—begin—to talk nonsense—this time, promise me—oh, promise me—to put your hand over my mouth. Oh, you must promise me.’

‘Yes, but it does not matter; I shan’t remember.’

‘Oh, but what I say will be all lies, nurse—all lies, every word of it. I know it will. And even if you don’t hear it, perhaps *he* might—*he* might.’

‘Who might?’ said the nurse. ‘There is no one here.’

But Elena, in her pain, was beyond the reach of reason.

‘He, he!’ she cried in a voice unnaturally acute. ‘Meleagro, Meleagro—your hand! Put your hand over my mouth, Meleagro. You promised, you promised. Oh, it is all lies. Meleagro! Where’s your hand? Let me feel your hand. Put it over my mouth—over, over—right, right over, so that I can’t talk any more nonsense, can’t tell any more lies. Oh, do, do put your hand over my mouth; quickly, quickly, or he will come and hear me, and then, and then—oh, Meleagro, we shall all be in hell! Oh, quickly, quickly!’

She was raving in her pain, with twisted hands. The nurse, to calm her, laid cool fingers across the dying woman’s fevered lips. The touch calmed her, and after a long pause, broken only by her swift, sobbing sighs, she spoke again more placidly.

‘I told you so,’ she said. ‘Oh, nurse, did I say anything—did I begin to say anything?’

‘You called for your husband,’ said the other, who knew her duty.

But the well-known gloss had a dire effect. Terror lightened again in Elena’s eyes.

‘He is not to come near me, listen—not to come near me while I am like this!’ she cried. ‘You must not let him into the room. Promise me—promise me that you won’t

let him into the room, not if he knocks at the door all night. I must not see him—I must not see him! Keep him away!’

‘Yes, yes; no one shall trouble you. You will be better soon, dear.’

Elena read the sinister meaning in the speech, and searched the speaker’s face with pathetic eyes.

‘Does that mean——’ she began, then stopped. ‘Yes, of course it does. I shall soon be out of danger now. How long, nurse?’

Direct answers being disliked in medicine, the woman was reduced to evasions.

‘You will be glad to rest,’ she said.

‘That means that it will be in a few hours,’ said Elena to herself, with a sigh of relief. ‘Will there be any more pain?’

‘Hardly any—perhaps just a very little, but none before the end. And you are so brave.’

‘Brave—brave! Ah, well, one does what one can.’

A knock came at the door. The nurse went to answer it, and stood in whispered colloquy. Elena strained darkening eyes after her as her absence was prolonged.

‘Come back!’ she called. ‘What is it?’

The whisperers were silent, and nurse returned to the bedside.

‘It is Mr. Ladon,’ she answered. ‘He wants to see you.’

A desperate, hunted look came into Elena’s face.

‘Never again,’ she said.

‘Oh, surely you will see him? He is suffering terribly,’ pleaded the nurse.

‘No,’ said Elena, her mouth fixed into rigid and agonized resolution.

‘Just for one moment,’ suggested the other, reluctant to harass the dying.

‘I—I—am afraid.’

‘Oh no, no, dear ; you must not be afraid. What are you afraid of?’

‘I am afraid—he may hear me talking nonsense. Nurse, the pain is coming back, and I shall talk nonsense if he comes. I know I shall. I am afraid.’

‘Oh, hush, hush ! You will be better in a moment. Just let poor Mr. Ladon come in for one minute. Now do. It will make him so miserable if you don’t.’

The agony in Elena’s face gathered and broke in two slow tears.

‘Only one little, little minute, then,’ she conditioned ; ‘and, nurse, if you hear me beginning to speak nonsense, even quite, quite small nonsense, promise to put your hand over my mouth quickly—quickly, and send him away.’

Signing assent with a nod, the nurse returned to the door and admitted Tempest Ladon. For an instant the young man stood, shaken by his grief, then he came and knelt at the bedside. Elena smiled at him.

‘Poor boy !’ she said. ‘How pale he looks !’

The nurse withdrew discreetly. He took his wife’s hand.

‘How you squeeze my hand !’ said Elena, forcing a wan little laugh. ‘My poor bones all go crunch-crunch when you take my hand. It hurts ! it hurts ! it hurts !’ she cried suddenly. She was white. A heavy sob escaped the man who knelt by her side.

‘Elena,’ he said—‘Elena.’

Elena was silent for a moment, controlling herself. Then she spoke again.

‘What a nuisance !’ she said. ‘What a nuisance it is to be so ill—and to die !’ He could not answer.

‘Hold me—hold me close !’ cried Elena. ‘I am so lonely now ; it is getting dark all round me.’

Her husband murmured something about heaven.

'Heaven,' she answered, 'heaven—yes. Tempest, Tempest dear, do you think we shall ever meet again anywhere?'

He raised his face at the anxiety in her tone. His voice was full of confidence as he answered.

'Yes, Elena, we shall meet again,' he said. 'Then we shall know even as we are known, though here we only see in part, and only know in part. There everything will be made clear.'

Pure terror convulsed her features at this reminder. 'Oh, promise me, promise me, Tempest—promise me that you will always love me. Promise that you will always believe me, whatever in the world may happen. Oh, Tempest, if we never meet again! O God pity me!'

'You know I love you,' he answered softly, 'you know I shall always love you.'

'O God,' she murmured, as if to herself—'O God, spare us all the truth.'

Her husband could not understand. He thought she was wandering in her weakness.

'You will always be with me, dear, to comfort poor me,' he said. 'And there is your baby too. He is a part of you. And while you are waiting for me beyond, he will be here, leading me towards you, Elena, reminding me every day of your face and your dear ways, Elena. It will be only for such a little while that we shall be parted.'

'My child! my child!' said Elena slowly; her eyes were large and dark with mysterious horror. 'Oh, Tempest, my child!' Then, in the strain of anguish, her endurance snapped and jangled. She was whiter than before, more terrified, more weary. She laid her hands violently upon her mouth, and fought back the words that wanted to come. 'I won't! I won't!' he heard her cry. 'I knew this would happen. Oh, Meleagro, I knew it, I knew it!' In a desperate crisis she strangled her own utterance. There

was a short, terrible struggle ; then for a while her danger passed, and she was calmer. She smiled faintly into her husband's frightened eyes.

'You—see—how silly. . .' she whispered. 'I talk all kind of silliness. I remember and I forget—Heaven, how I remember all sort of silliness out of long ago. Don't think of it. It is only foolish, nonsense-talk. Listen, though. Soon you must leave me. Promise you will leave me when I tell you. I cannot bear—no, I cannot, that you should remember your poor Elena, so wild and silly. It will come on again soon, and then you must go. Promise! You must only remember poor Elena—gentle, and so nice, so nice. Promise me!'

'You will send me away from you?' he murmured.

'Quite—quite away. Why, I shall be gone myself by then. It will not be Elena; it will only be a silly mad woman saying foolishness, Tempest, such stupid foolishness. It will not be me at all, then. And you do not want—no?—to stay in the room with a silly stranger woman?' She smiled at him persuasively. He fondled her idle, half-helpless hand, but could make no other answer. She looked at him very lovingly.

'I wonder—I wonder,' she said. 'I have confessed everything, and now I am ready to die. Tempest, do you think God will understand that one may tell little lies to a person one loves because one loves them so? Do you think He will understand? It is not for one's own sake one does it; it is for theirs.'

'Oh! I am not of your faith,' groaned Tempest Ladon, 'but God will understand you, Elena dearest. God will be merciful. There are more ways than one into heaven. You need not be afraid. Oh, Elena! have you ever lied to me?'

She laughed for a moment, shrilly, rather horribly.

'Only little weeny-tiny lies,' she said—'little stories to

make you comfortable; nothing to matter—nothing to matter at all. You believe me, Tempest—you believe me? Nothing to matter at all.'

'Of course I believe you, darling,' said her husband, kissing the words from her lips. Relief passed over her face, and was succeeded by determination.

'You forgive me everything—everything, in advance,' she smiled. 'Tempest, you have not much longer to stay now. Listen! there is something you must do for me. I wanted to do it myself, but never—never could I have the heart. Now listen. You see that cassetta—that box?'

His eyes followed the direction of her urgent glance. On the table by her bedside stood an old casket of Italian work, brilliantly painted with saints and angels on its panels.

'Yes,' he answered.

'Burn it,' she went on quickly, speaking fiercely under her breath. 'Oh, I ought to have done for myself so long ago. As soon as I am dead, burn it—burn it altogether up. You must do this for me, or I shall never lie in peace. Promise me to burn that box as soon as I am dead, Tempest.' She fixed him with imploring eyes.

'I will do anything for you—anything in the world to make you happy,' he protested; 'but what is in this box of yours, darling?' He fingered it, threatening to lift its latch.

Suddenly her thin arm darted out and seized his fingers. Her eyes were blazing.

'Not to! not to!' she almost screamed. 'Never! never! never! Silly things inside—just silly private things of mine. Stupid things—never would interest you. Promise me to burn—promise me to burn. Old rubbish papers—letters out of long ago.' She fell back gasping.

'Your letters, darling? Letters of yours,' he asked in a soft voice—'letters to me?'

A look of inspired cunning came across her face.

Yes, Tempest,' she answered gently, 'little letters that I have written for you. But now you must never see them. O God! forgive me—God forgive me!' she cried. 'No, you must never see them. Promise you will burn the box and never open.'

'Are you going to take everything away from me?' he piteously protested. 'Can you not leave me even your letters to comfort me?'

'Oh no, no, no; you must promise—you must promise. This is the last thing—the last thing you can do for me in all the world. Let me die, Tempest—let me die comfortable and happy. You must not refuse me—no, you must not refuse me. You would never be happy again, Tempest, if you refused me. Promise, promise!'

'Oh, Elena!' he murmured. 'I cannot deny you; I must not deny you. But this is a cruel thing you ask me to do.'

'Silly letters,' she pleaded—'silly letters for you that I never meant to show you—only a girl's silly letters. I am ashamed. And now you have promised—ah!' She sighed in the intensity of her relief. Then she became anxious once more. 'Not enough,' she cried—'not enough! You must swear to burn my cassetta for me. Then I shall die happy. You have promised already. If you are honest, you will swear also. It can cost you no more. Swear now—quickly swear!'

But he hesitated.

'I am only human,' he groaned. 'Oh, Elena, do not ask too much of me! I have promised to do what I can. But how can you ask me to bind myself with an oath? Suppose——'

But his refusal was fatal to her control. Already the pain had attacked her again. Now she glared desperately about her, and shrieked in the grip of delirium. Meleagro, Meleagro!' she screamed. 'He will not—he will not!' In

a last effort she tried to stifle her utterance, but the wild words bubbled up beneath her writhing fingers, and the nurse, waiting outside, heard her agony, and judged it time to interrupt. Elena still had sense to rejoice in her return. 'Take him away,' she cried—'take him away! Nonsense talk! He promised—he has promised! Take him away!'

Tempest Ladon caught the respectful compassion of the nurse's eye. His glance was pitiful in its earnest inquiry. She understood his question, and slowly nodded.

'I think you had better go now, sir,' she said. 'Mrs. Ladon will be the better for a rest. Must not overexcite her, you know. Perhaps she will be able to see you again later.'

He rose and went very reluctantly from the room. Elena, behind her clutching hands, had watched his going with feverish avidity. Now, as soon as the door was safely closed behind him, the torrent of her pain could safely break forth. She had guaranteed her safety.

Tempest Ladon never knew how he lived through the rest of that day. From time to time they brought him news of Elena's progress towards the end. From the hour of his going the clouds never broke round her darkening consciousness. From stage to weakening stage of delirium she passed as the twilight sank down over Ottemer, and in the late evening she rapidly failed and died. He never saw her alive again. Her death left him in a blind prostration of despair. He knew nothing of the course of time or events. Elena was dead, and laid by in the vault of the Ladons. No other thought could find room in his brain. And when at last he slowly and painfully returned to consciousness of the world outside, he found that the only thing of comfort left him was that painted casket he had promised to destroy. Now that he knew it for the precious shrine of her tenderest confidences, now that it was all of her he had, he knew for certain that he could not bear to part with it. He felt sure

that she would never have wished him to, had she been able to foresee the depth of his sorrow and the consolation that its company could give him. It was, as it were, an oracle that brought him her messages and the sound of her voice, long after her tongue was stiff and cold in the grave. The shrine was far too sacred to be violated by curiosity, though it should be for ever an ark of holiness. To have it was enough; to know what lovely things it contained was a joy that could not be made greater. He realized that the unknown sweetness was all the sweeter for being unknown. Throughout his life he would keep the trust faithfully sealed, and with his death the box should be burned or buried, as Elena had desired. And thus, after all, her wishes would be fulfilled, and at no cost of suffering for himself. For now he felt that the destruction of her last relic would be as bitter as a second parting from his wife. With satisfaction he remembered that her sweet soul had been distracted by delirium at the end. Her real self could never have asked the things that her dying self had so desperately demanded. Her real self would have left him her legacy of love, as the last comfort in her power to give. It was only in pain and terror of death that her spirit had been so wrung by torment as to lose sight of all her tenderness for him. So from year to year that locked casket continued the blessed consolation of his loneliness. For, after all, though he had promised to burn it, yet he had never sworn; God he felt, had intervened to save him from that.

CHAPTER II

MRS. BUDGELL, the Vicar's wife, was holding her fortnightly work-party, and the occasion was rendered unusually illustrious by the presence of Mrs. Bolpett of Bolpetts.

Mrs. Bolpett was a large woman of majestic port. Her pale and glistening hair was arranged in unctuous waves. She wore a black mushroom hat and a heavy black satin dolman richly adorned with beads and bugles, from beneath whose tails her skirt of gray cashmere flowed abroad in handsome billows. Her face was large and pallid, arrogant and aquiline of profile, and on her massive chins there sprouted a sparse beard of tawny bristles. Her whole demeanour was filled with the serene placidity of pride proper to one whose ancestors, in her own right as well as by marriage, have been settled for six hundred years in the same place, without ever doing anything worthy of notice, or perpetrating any *mésalliance* with wit or genius. So impeccable was her pedigree that Mrs. Bolpett found it quite unnecessary to follow modern ways or to alloy the fine metal of her mind with the dross of contemporary literature. She never read anything but cooking recipes, and her conversation was entirely personal.

Having arrayed her feet in the most convenient posture, Mrs. Bolpett extracted a smelling-bottle and a handkerchief from the reticule of black velvet that depended from her broad silver zone, and laid them on the table at her side. This accomplished, she uncovered her embroidery, and burrowed in her capacious huswife for needle and silks.

‘Dear, dear!’ she said, ‘how trying these needles are to one’s eyesight! I wonder if you—— Thanks! thanks!’ Receiving the threaded needle from Mrs. Budgell, her reverent little hostess, she unfolded the square of a cushion and prepared to work. ‘What do you think of it?’ she inquired with confidence, turning to Miss Baynes, her only other fellow-worker for the imminent bazaar.

‘My *dear* Mrs. Bolpett!’ gasped the Vicar’s wife, with a gasp of devout enthusiasm.

‘Oh, how sweetly, sweetly pretty!’ cried Miss Baynes, who never yet had dined at Bolpetts.

The cushion was of orange plush, a gorgeous affair, over whose broad expanse large purple parrots perched in a bower of magenta cabbage roses. Miss Baynes clasped her thin hands in a rapture, and put her long pale face on one side.

‘I never did,’ she declared. ‘What a delightful imagination, dear Mrs. Bolpett!’

‘Thanks, thanks! I always say what good taste you have, Miss Baynes. I think it is a little out of the common myself. It is quite my own design, and the stitch is taken from a curtain at Bolpetts, worked by the second wife of the Jeremy Bolpett of King Charles’s time. I think that when it is made up, and edged with chenille balls of the same colour as the parrots, it will be a very handsome piece of work indeed. You must put it in the very centre of your stall, Mrs. Budgell.’

‘Oh yes, indeed!’ cried her hostess. ‘It will make quite a sensation. I expect dear Mr. Ladon will buy it himself.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t think of that, thanks. We must keep it at Bolpetts at any cost. I shall put a reserve price on it and buy it in myself. It would never do to let such a thing go out of the family. The wife of every Bolpett has left her work in the house, and I certainly shall not neglect my duty in that way. My thimble? Ah, thanks, thanks!’

'How right you are!' sighed Miss Baynes.

But Mrs. Budgell had been roused by the mention of Mr. Ladon.

'Talking of Mr. Ladon,' she said, 'have you seen——'

'A most astonishing sight, Mrs. Budgell, I assure you. I have not seen the gates open for many a day. Generally one has to ring for about half an hour before Mrs. Metcalfe comes to unlock them.'

A solemn silence reigned. From the window all three looked eagerly out upon the entrance to the park of Ottemer. For the first time since Elena Ladon's funeral, five-and-twenty years before, the great iron gates stood open.

'What can have happened, Mrs. Bolpett? Do you think Mr. Ladon can be going away?'

'Oh, have I dropped my skein? . . . thanks, thanks! No, I imagine that probably Lady Malham, or Mrs. Gordon Wentworth, has remembered her brother's existence at last, and is coming to stay with him. I am sure it is time, Mrs. Budgell, though I never find fault with my equals.'

'But did Mr. Ladon ever quarrel with his sisters?' inquired Mrs. Budgell anxiously, ceasing for a moment to hem a handkerchief.

'Not that I am aware of,' replied Mrs. Bolpett in state, rejoicing in her supremacy over the conversation. 'No, there has never been any quarrel between the Ladons, except that Tempest shut himself up after his wife's death and refused to see any human being beyond his son and his servants.'

'He must be a strange, morose man,' suggested Miss Baynes.

'I can hardly think it becoming, Miss Baynes, for anyone to talk so of Mr. Ladon of Ottemer. He adored his poor wife, and her death was such a shock to him that he could not bear ever to speak to another woman, not even his own sisters. So there he lives, and has lived for twenty-five

years, if you'll believe me, all alone with his son in that great house. Oh, my scissors! Ah, thanks, thanks!

'Do you know the son at all?' inquired Mrs. Budgell. 'How has he been educated? I see him at church, of course, but I have never had more than two words with him.'

'Educated? Oh, at home—tutors, you know, and that kind of thing. It must have been a dreary life for a young man like St. John Ladon, though personally I do not think that a gentleman has any need of education. And with a father who adores him, as Tempest Ladon adores his son, I cannot imagine what any boy can want more.'

Mrs. Budgell bit her thread.

'Dear me!' she said. 'How very nice! Do you see much of them, dear Mrs. Bolpett?'

'I call upon them regularly twice a year, once in the summer and once in the winter. I consider it due to them, as neighbours of almost equal standing. Of course, I never find them at home, but my maid Golightly is engaged to the head footman at Ottemer, so I hear all the news.'

'I wonder whether young Mr. Ladon will ever marry,' murmured Miss Baynes with a maidenly flush and sigh. She was a pallid district visitor, with dust-coloured hair and a small black straw hat whose dark blue ribbon was pock-marked with pin-holes.

'Probably, Miss Baynes,' replied Mrs. Bolpett majestically. 'When his father dies, I shall tell him that I consider it his duty to do so; and no doubt he will marry someone of his own position, Miss Baynes. But I cannot think that he will do so during his father's lifetime; it would upset Mr. Ladon most terribly. He and his son are like husband and wife already, and any third person, especially a woman, would be an intruder into poor Elena Ladon's place. Yes, he is a strange man, Tempest Ladon, and you may be sure he would not tolerate another woman in his wife's house.'

'How beautifully you do talk, Mrs. Bolpett!' cried

crushed Miss Baynes, as the conversation lapsed into silence on the appearance of tea.

But suddenly a strangled mew broke in upon the murmur of mastication. Mrs. Budgell instantly rose, and poured milk into a saucer.

‘Poor darling!’ she exclaimed. ‘And does she want her tea?’

‘Oh, how are the sweet little things?’ cried Miss Baynes. ‘I quite forgot all about them.’

Mrs. Budgell turned back the blanket that covered a basket by the fireside, and revealed an animal like a fawn-coloured tiger, with blue eyes, around whom rolled three smaller creatures like indiarubber-coloured maggots, with sooty faces on the pattern of their mother’s.

‘Whatever——’ began Mrs. Bolpett.

‘Oh! don’t you know them?’ cried Miss Baynes. ‘A dear, darling Siamese puss and her precious children.’

‘What remarkably strange creatures!’ replied the other. ‘Very ugly, I must say! Another bun? Ah, thanks!’

‘Oh, but so sweet and valuable!’ cried Miss Baynes, while Mrs. Budgell fed the mother with milk. ‘They come from the royal palace at Bangkok—don’t they, Mrs. Budgell?—and the natives think that they are incarnations of dead kings and queens.’

‘Poor benighted heathen!’ commented Mrs. Bolpett, as she sat with the teacup on one knee and her loaded plate on the other, firmly contemplating the kittens through her lorgnette. The mother meanwhile, having first fixed her audience with a cold and disapproving blue eye, proceeded to lap the milk, while Miss Baynes continued to expound her value, natural history, and proper treatment to Mrs. Bolpett. This done, the cat and kittens were once more enveloped in the blanket.

‘They are rather delicate when they are young,’ explained Mrs. Budgell, returning to the tea-table.

'Shall I have some more tea?' asked Mrs. Bolpett. 'Thanks, thanks. Most strange. I never saw such things before.' This, in Mrs. Bolpett's vocabulary, was usually the last word of condemnation; but on the present occasion her tone was tempered by the news of the kittens' value and royal extraction. 'What do you mean to do with them, Mrs. Budgell?'

'I shall sell one of them at the bazaar, and keep another.'

'I will tell you what you should do,' said Mrs. Bolpett, as one inspired. 'You should send one of them up to Ottemer. It would be the very thing to please a lonely man like Mr. Ladon, and, by all you tell me, Miss Baynes, if these animals come from a palace, they would be much more suitable and happy at Ottemer than in a tiny vicarage like this.' She now spoke of the cats with undisguised respect.

'And you wouldn't—accept one of them yourself, dear Mrs. Bolpett?'

'Thanks, thanks. I should love to, but our little King Charleses, you know. They were started by the Jeremy Bolpett of King James's time, so really I do not think I could do anything to hurt their feelings. Otherwise—where shall I put my cup down? Thanks, thanks. And my plate? Thanks, thanks.'

'How it will comfort poor desolate Mr. Ladon to play with the sweet little thing!' sighed Cora Baynes romantically. 'There is nothing like an animal for soothing our sorrow.'

'I think he must also have found comfort in his religion,' said Mrs. Budgell gently. 'That is always such a stand-by, and he is quite the most devoted church-goer and communicant we have. He never misses a service, and I can see from my pew that his whole heart is in what he is saying.'

'Ah! what a beautiful sight to see that magnificent gray-

haired man, with all his load of griefs, reciting the Athanasian Creed as if every word were milk and honey !' cried ecstatic Miss Baynes.

'Yes, indeed, Cora. He loves the Athanasian Creed so much that I quite regret we do not have it oftener. He is a true devout Churchman of the old school, such as nowadays is only too rare in our midst.' The Vicar's wife dropped into a reminiscence of her husband's pulpit voice.

'A noble enthusiast,' answered Cora, kindling—'a mighty warrior of the Church militant. You know he won't have a Dissenter on any of his farms.'

If Mrs. Bolpett had sat out this dialogue in silence, the strange act must be attributed to her astonishment and pleasure. But at this point she once more made her solemn utterance heard.

'I am greatly rejoiced at what you tell me, Mrs. Budgell,' she said. 'Golightly never told me this, and unfortunately we do not come to your church ourselves, because Mr. Bolpett and I think it more respectful to attend the chapel at Bolpetts that was built by the Jeremy Bolpett of Queen Mary's time. So I had no suspicion that Mr. Ladon indulged in the consolations of religion. This is truly a mercy which I had not expected. For the Ladons are a wild stock, and I never heard before of a Ladon yet who was a good Churchman and a frequent attendant. They generally left that sort of thing to the lower classes. I hope that Tempest Ladon won't exaggerate, or go in for any enthusiasm or anything of that sort. For men of his strong, gloomy kind are never to be quite trusted.'

'He won't even have the brougham brought out on Sundays, you know,' continued Mrs. Budgell. 'No matter how it rains, he and his son come trudging down to church through all the mud and the wet.'

'Dear me, most unbecoming ! But no wonder : his loneliness has driven him into all these queer fads,' replied

Mrs. Bolpett, who would never have dreamed of walking anywhere, on any day, in any weather. 'Pray do not lose an hour, Mrs. Budgell, in sending him the kitten. A little company may cure him of this morbid religion.'

Mrs. Budgell was torn between her religious zeal and her veneration for Mrs. Bolpett. She was saved the glories of martyrdom or the ignominies of acquiescence by the timely sound of a vehicle. The three workers simultaneously peered through the muslin curtains at the stately carriage which a pair of solid chestnuts wheeled rapidly in at the open gates of Ottemer, and up the steep drive beyond. Mrs. Bolpett laid down her cushion, and spoke with the tranquillity of the successful prophet.

'I told you so,' she said. 'It is Melusina Malham. Now I must really get Golightly to find out why she has come back here, after staying away for nearly thirty years.'

'What a very handsome lady the Marchioness is!' said Miss Baynes with awe. 'How immensely tall, and what a beautiful profile, and how upright she sits!'

'My dear Miss Baynes,' rejoined Mrs. Bolpett heavily, 'Melusina Malham and I belong to a time when all young women of position were taught to hold themselves properly, and not to slouch. Really, you people do nothing but chatter.'

Then, crushed by this rebuke, the little work-party began to work.

Lady Malham did indeed hold herself upright. Her face was beautiful in its immovable pallor, and her whole bearing and expression were filled with the grand pride in calm of one who has played a good part in the pageant of life. She sat sternly upright, gazing across the landscape from beneath lowered lids, with an expression of passionless indifference that was one of her many methods of subtly conveying her annoyance to its object. Lady Malham was distinctly annoyed. On arrival at her journey's end, she

had indeed found a victoria in waiting to carry her to Ottemer, but no provision whatever for the transport of her baggage and her maid. This in itself was provoking, and the hire of a prehistoric vehicle from a local public-house lacked in dignity; but all these griefs sank into nothing beside the thought that this neglect might prove symptomatic of her brother's attitude towards her. She felt that his long life of seclusion had evidently turned him into a barbarian, in whose existence such profound truths as the importance of maids had ceased to hold any place. Then it occurred to her that the omission to provide for her luggage might indicate that her brother had no intention of letting her spend so much as one night beneath his roof. At this notion even Lady Malham quaked. For, splendid and impregnable lady that she was, she, like all mortals, had one spot of weakness. Fearless in general, she feared at times the harsh and passionate brother, whom she had not seen for so many years; and this visit to Ottemer, despite Mrs. Bolpett's conjectures, was entirely of her own procuring. So far as any sign went, Tempest Ladon would have been content to go down the rest of his path to the grave without ever seeing either of his sisters again in this life. But Lady Malham had been seized one day with an imperious desire to revisit the old place, to discover what her nephew might be like, and, if possible, to knit again some ties of friendship with her brother. Accordingly she had written instantly to Tempest Ladon, pointing out the legitimacy of all these ambitions, reproving his obstinate isolation, and announcing her intended arrival on a certain day and by a certain train. And now she had arrived, having previously, with her usual wisdom, despatched her daughter Enid on a visit. Inasmuch as the carriage had been sent for her, she saw that her invasion of Ottemer was to be condoned; inasmuch as nothing had been done for her luggage, she feared that it was to be ruthlessly curtailed. Lady Malham belonged to

a day when fidgeting was not permitted ; her one sign of agitation found vent at last in a changed position of the hands, but even this did not satisfy her ; she unfolded her parasol with some petulance, though the weather offered no excuse for it.

But as the carriage turned in at last through the gates of Ottemer, softer feelings came to soothe her. She had always loved the place, and since she had left it life had carried her into many strange and arid paths, from which any return to the scene of her youth was as a return to the freshness of youth itself. Years of experience, of sorrow, and the worries of the world had hardened her, had fixed her in a disdainful calm, had rendered her adamant, she thought, to the wildest or most insidious attacks of emotion. Yet now, as she watched the unfolding scenes of the park, and remembered their succession as from the depths of a long-forgotten past, excitement gained her, and tears swam for a moment in her eyes. Her demeanour relaxed from its unbending splendour. She put down the parasol, and leant forward with a thrill of delight. Surely even her brother could not be so much altered as to have lost all kind memory of his favourite sister, with whom he had never quarrelled, but from whom he had so sternly severed himself in the bitterness of his sorrow over Elena Ladon's death. 'Upon my word,' thought Lady Malham to herself, 'the whole place looks as if I had not been away for a fortnight. Evidently Tempest has not forgotten how to look after the estate. I never saw the deer in better condition. . . . Dear me ! even the air seems like an old friend. I suppose Tempest and I are the only belongings of Ottemer that have changed at all in the last five-and-twenty years.' She might have consoled herself with the reflection that the years had made no such dreadful havoc with herself. Her pale face, her beautiful profile, almost arrogant in its good breeding, had only settled into a statuesque loveliness with

the process of time; her air combined the dignity of the last age with the experience of this. She was a thoroughly successful product of life's factory, though she had always known better than to join in many elderly ladies' frenzied pursuit of the modern and the up-to-date. She had preferred to follow her own path in her own way at her own pace.

At last the carriage gained the summit of the hill, and began to roll down the gradual descent towards Ottemer. Already she could see the lake from which the place took its name, gleaming coldly through the alders that shrouded its nearer corner. She remembered, with a smile, how she and her brother had gone a-hunting there once for the otters whence the water was supposed to have its title. She was more and more moved by memories. Soon the road was following the curves of the lake, and already on the farther shore was visible the long mass of the great white house. 'I declare,' thought Lady Malham, more to recall herself to the present than for any other purpose, 'Tempest has certainly kept some notion of dignity. I thought he would have let the place go to rack and ruin. A woman always thinks that a man is sure to make a pigsty of his home if he is left to himself. It just shows how unnecessary we really are, after all. Why, a regiment of women couldn't have kept Ottemer any better than Tempest! Here we are at last. How cold it is! Why haven't I been feeling cold all the way?' The carriage stopped before the pillared portico. A butler appeared on the steps, backed by the large folding-doors, where footmen were dimly visible. Lady Malham, who, despite her common-sense, had imagined her brother wallowing in a dishevelled bachelorhood, and attended only by a snuffy charwoman in a corner of the house, could not restrain a little gasp at the sight of splendours and orderliness so at variance with all the novels she had ever read that dealt with the sorrowful

or disillusioned male. For all the comeliness of the park, and for all her own meditations upon it, she had not been able quite to cure herself of the notion that lonely Tempest Ladon must inevitably be living the life of a Sir Pitt Crawley, surrounded by Horrockses male and female. Here was a surprise indeed. The butler descended to the carriage, and helped her to alight. With redoubled stateliness she trailed her draperies up the steps and into the great hall.

‘I was to tell your ladyship,’ he said, ‘that Mr. Ladon is engaged at present, but that he hopes to see you at dinner—eight o’clock, m’lady.’

‘Thank you. And how is my brother?’

‘Mr. Ladon is in fairly good health at present, m’lady, though he suffers from bad rheumatism at times. Tea is in the Silver Room, m’lady, and the Lake Chamber has been prepared for your ladyship. Shall I send for the housekeeper to show you the way, m’lady?’

‘Thank you, I think I shall remember it perfectly myself. By the way, my maid and my luggage ought to be here before long. There was nothing at the station for them, so I had to get a fly from the inn.’

‘I am very sorry that your ladyship should have had the trouble,’ said the butler with an air of perturbation that immediately reassured Lady Malham as to the reception of her visit. ‘The coachman must have made some mistake. Mr. Ladon was very anxious that your ladyship should find everything to your taste. I hope you will overlook the error.’

‘Certainly. By the way, what is your name?’

‘Barclay, m’lady.’

‘Thanks. Is Mr. St. John at home?’

‘He is with Mr. Ladon at present, m’lady. Shall I show you to the Silver Room? Mr. St. John may be coming down to tea. He sometimes does, but Mr. Ladon never takes tea.’

‘Oh, thanks; I shall find my way, Barclay.’

Lady Malham wandered away through the long corridor, wondering as she went at the impeccable order in which she saw that all the old possessions of the house were kept. Even the grimy old busts and statues of the Cæsars had been cleaned, and now shone resplendent in the gray twilight of the passage. As she passed along the corridor, they gleamed upon her like ghosts in the twilight. It was always twilight in the Long Passage, as she remembered with a twinge of depression that was soon swamped by her childish pleasure at the ease with which she remembered the way, and each incidental ornament on her path. At last she came to the door of the Silver Room, opened it, and entered.

‘Dear me!’ she exclaimed, ‘it all smells exactly as it used to do.’ The atmosphere was full of memories. She sniffed. ‘Exactly as it was. Pot-pourri, orris and mountain air. It is wonderful how a smell always brings up one’s keenest memories.’ She advanced to one of the long windows, and stood looking out over the lake. ‘I don’t believe that anything ever changes in the world,’ she thought, ‘except, perhaps, we that live in it, and even that I feel inclined to doubt at times. Why, I feel as much the same as the house is, or the lake, or anything. I can hardly believe that I have been away for as much as twenty-five hours, not to speak of as many years. Oh, how good it is to be at home again, and what a comfort it is that I did not bring Enid! A new person would have jarred terribly in the old place. Well, now, I suppose I must have tea, and pluck up my courage to interview Tempest at dinner.’

With a sigh of reluctance she withdrew from the window, taking off her gloves, and made her way slowly towards the tea-table, delayed at every other step by some picture or ornament that she remembered as part of her girlhood¹ ‘The tea is good,’ she thought, as she poured herself out a

cup at length, with another sigh of almost perfect satisfaction. 'What a treasure of a housekeeper Tempest must have got! But trust a man always to live on the best of everything, whether he has a wife or not. And yet one can tell no woman lives here—not a flower, not a leaf to be seen in the room. I wonder whatever that poor son of his is like.'

Meanwhile a different scene was proceeding upstairs. Tempest Ladon and his son were discussing the new arrival, of whose advent they had been duly informed by the butler. Naturally, they also were wondering in their turn what she might be like. Tempest Ladon was seated by the fire that flamed in a large old-fashioned chimneypiece. The room was now filled with dusk, and his face could only be seen fitfully in the gleams of the burning logs—a strong, clean-shaven face, rugged with passions and convictions, and above it hoary masses of pale fair hair, such as was the heritage of the Ladons. He bore much the same kind of resemblance to his sister Melusina as a Rodin to a Pheidias. Strength was in either face, but in the one carved into fine tranquillity, in the other blurred and roughened with violence. He had the same stately build, but his carriage was more imperious and brutal than serene in self-confidence. His voice had had once the same clear, almost metallic ring, but now its tone was curiously husky and muffled. In every way she gave the impression of a woman schooled into control, he that of a man long abandoned to the tyranny of his moods—a masterful, desolate, and incalculable personality.

His son, who sat in the window-seat loosely nursing a gun, promised a dire surprise to his expectant aunt. He was slender and dark—in short, he was no Ladon. He was his Italian mother's child. And in that, perhaps, lay the secret of the bond between his father and himself. For while the one loved with words of exaggerated indifference such as an Englishman generally uses to conceal his affec-

tion from its object, the other, though hardly more effusive, guessed the secret satisfactorily, and was able to return that love without disguise beyond that of scanty words. Acute beholders, however, might have guessed that St. John Ladon did not find his life entirely adequate to his requirements. A certain line of sullenness lay about his mouth, and when he was not talking to his father an air of boredom pervaded his movements, and seemed to deprive his actions of their savour. He shot, and fished, and rode, but all with a suggestion that they were not enough for his complete development. His was the usual fate of the child brought up in a perpetual jealous intimacy with a devoted parent—bliss and radiance through the earlier years, partial atrophy and bitterness for all the rest of his life. At least, with this result of his education was he threatened, now in his twenty-fifth year. He had hardly in his life been away from Ottemer, never in his life been away from his father, nor suffered to contract an intimacy with any third person. Small wonder that he was fluttered by the thought of meeting a new human being, and on terms of near acquaintance—and that human being, too, a woman and a relation.

‘You wonder why Melusina wanted to come, do you?’ said Tempest Ladon to his son after a pause. ‘I’ll tell you: she is going to take you away from me and show you the world, and a very good thing too.’

‘I need not go, I suppose; it’s a free country,’ answered the other.

‘Oh yes, you will,’ replied his father; ‘and be very glad to go into the bargain. A pretty life you lead here, boxed up with one old man, and never seeing anyone else.’

‘Why, you know that I am not going away from this place. It isn’t likely that I shall see anything better outside.’

‘That is what you say because you don’t know anything or anyone else,’ replied his father, mollified. ‘You will soon

think differently when Melusina has taken you to half a dozen parties and made you rub noses with a score of giggling misses.'

'There's no need to say that sort of thing, you know, father. Even if I did go away for a week or two——'

'Ah, now you're beginning, are you? I thought you would. You do want to get away from me, after all? Of course, I knew it. This is a damned dull place, and I am a damned dull old fogey! Well, I suppose it's natural; but you might as well say it out roundly, instead of mincing round the question like that.'

'Please don't be so confoundedly touchy about it!' answered the other. 'Hadn't we better wait till Aunt Melusina has tried to carry me off before we begin to play—what is it?—oh! Lear and Cordelia?'

'What young people are coming to nowadays I can't imagine!'

'No, I suppose not. Why, as for young people, you haven't seen one for twenty or thirty years. You can't call me a young person, I am afraid. I am as old as you are, to a day.'

'That comes of living with me. I expect I had no right to keep you with me as I have. . . . Tell me honestly, St. John, don't you ever feel bored here?'

'Well, I suppose shooting rabbits and grouse and things may rather pall on anyone after a bit; and if I could have had the world as well as you to play with, I don't suppose I should have been worse off than I am now. But don't you make any mistake about it. I had far rather have you without the world than the world without you. Does that satisfy you?'

'Yes, I suppose it must. We have got on pretty well together, St. John, just you and I, haven't we, in spite of my temper and my aches and pains? But I know now you ought to go away for a bit. I want you to go with

Melusina. She always was a great lady, Melusina, and she will be able to show you the world. I want you to go with her, St. John, if only to show that you bear me no malice for keeping you penned up here all through your youth.'

'I don't know,' answered his son slowly. 'We will see about it. Very likely she won't even think of asking me. Aren't you going to dress, father?'

'Is it time? Why, yes, of course it is. I am keeping you, too. Go and get ready to meet your aunt, and try to look as English as possible. She isn't accustomed to Italian monkeys, and Melusina was always nice about her company. I don't know that I shall be sorry to see Melusina again myself.'

So saying, Tempest Ladon rose from his chair, looked his son up and down with jocose disapproval, and left the room.

St. John Ladon sat for another moment on the window-seat, meditating.

'Do I want to go, or do I not?' he thought. 'I'm hanged if I know. I want to stay here, and I don't want to leave him, of course; but then, I suppose there are things worth seeing beyond the rim of those eternal hills.' He gazed out over the darkening landscape towards the level ridge of moorland that enclosed Ottemer on every side. The house and lake and woods lay, as it were, in a vast and shallow cup. Below, far away beyond, lay the world of men and cities. Over Ottemer lay gray clouds and twilight; the lid of the cup lay dusky and black from edge to edge. Only in the uttermost distance a glow and a glory of sun and colour were visible, shining down on the outer world beyond. 'Well, well, we shall see,' murmured St. John Ladon, resigning himself doubtfully to Fate. Then he rose, and passed into his bedroom to dress for the meeting with his aunt. He meant to satisfy her.

CHAPTER III

LADY MALHAM's maid had arrived from the station in a temper no less satisfactorily restored than that of her mistress. Her dignity had been grievously bruised at finding nothing to meet her, but hardly had the disreputable fly been ordered than the missing coachman from Ottemer drove up and explained that he had had some things to fetch from the town, and had been delayed longer than he had expected. All this did Portheris expound to her mistress during the processes of decoration, and expressed herself fully satisfied with the attentions of the household. Lady Malham's toilette was accordingly a performance accompanied by peace and goodwill, whose results were, therefore, so satisfactory that no room was left for doubts or trepidation. It was with a comfortable feeling of being once more a worthy inhabitant of Ottemer that Lady Malham, becomingly arrayed and glittering with jewels and smiles, descended at last to the drawing-room.

At its further end she saw her host standing to receive her. For a moment she started at the change that the years had wrought in him, then she laughed at herself for expecting that he could still be the young man of her recollection. With new courage and new tenderness she moved quickly towards him and smiled.

'Let me introduce your sister, Tempest,' she said, laughing to cover her emotion. 'You probably forget, but you have met her before.'

'When I look at you I can't believe that we have been

separated for more than a day,' answered her host, whose agitation and dread of the meeting had been far more noticeable than the woman's.

'Since when have you paid compliments, Tempest?' she said. 'But an ancient, ancient woman likes to be told that she reminds you of a young one.'

'How do you find the old place, Melusina?' asked her brother after a pause. 'We need not talk personalities, you and I. I—I am very glad to see you here again, Melusina.'

'You have denied yourself that pleasure for many years with a truly ascetic determination,' answered his sister. 'How do I find the place? Not a day older. I went into the nursery on my way down, and there was just the same dear old friendly smell as ever—chintz and rose-leaves, you remember.'

'I have lived here for three centuries, Melusina, but I have never gone in there since I have been alone.'

'Ah, you have not been in exile. One never goes to places that one always has the power of going to. It is only when one has lost the power that one realizes how bitterly one wants to go. I only came back from exile an hour ago. How cruel of you to keep me in banishment so long!'

'Yes, you mustn't scold me, Melusina, or we shall quarrel,' said her brother in a note of warning. 'What has been, has been.'

'And what will be, will be. And I hope that that may mean dinner. I could not eat a scrap of your excellent tea. I was too excited at being in the Silver Room again. But I like this room even better. . . . I like each room better than the last in this house, in fact.'

'Dinner is ready, I believe, Melusina. But I suppose we are waiting for my young backwoodsman.'

'Ah! Is he . . . very—very backwoodsy, Tempest, dear?'

‘What would you expect, brought up here all alone with a petulant and broody old gentleman in this dead-and-alive hole of a place, where he never sees a soul? I suppose it is a very dead-and-alive place, Melusina?’

‘To me, it is a very much alive place,’ replied his sister warmly. ‘But . . . well, for any young thing, perhaps it might get a little monotonous in the long-run.’

Her brother had hoped against hope for a different answer, as was shown by the clouding of his brow.

‘Oh, you women think every place monotonous where novels don’t grow on the trees, and there isn’t a tea-fight at every turn of the lane,’ he answered brusquely.

But his sister refused to be put out.

‘If one expected that, Tempest, life would indeed be a howling wilderness. But tell me about St. John. What is he like? What have you taught him? What sort of books does he read? Or does he do nothing but potter about with a gun?’

Tempest Ladon fixed her with a twinkling eye.

‘Imagine,’ he said, enjoying his joke, ‘what a boy is likely to be who has never said more than eight words to a woman, who has never seen a town or a tailor in his life, who has never had a friend in the world but his father.’

‘But do you mean to tell me that St. John has put up with that sort of existence for five-and-twenty years, Tempest?’ asked Lady Malham incredulously. ‘Has he never kicked at all, never insisted on having a life of his own? But what can the man be made of to stand it! I can hardly believe such a thing of a Ladon. You would not have stood such treatment for a week, Tempest. It’s unnatural. He can’t have any blood in his veins. Do you tell me he never tried to get away from here—never?’

Tempest paused.

‘No,’ he answered slowly; ‘St. John has never tried to get away from here, Melusina. Perhaps it *would* have been

more normal if he had. But, after all, why should he? Here he had plenty to do, plenty to read, as good a home as most. And—well, we have got on wonderfully happily together, Melusina. Perhaps that helps to account for his submission. I have always wished him to stay with me, and I expect my wishes have influenced him more than we know. You see, he has never been a riotous, passionate sort of boy, like most of us Ladons.'

Lady Malham looked at him firmly, and decided to be bold.

'I call it iniquitous, Tempest—yes, I do,' she said—'iniquitous to bring up a wretched boy in such an awful way. I never heard of anything so selfish. What on earth can anyone hope to make of him? If he is like his father, I expect he will be just a bear. . . . Does he dress for dinner? I notice the old bear does; but what about the cub?'

'You don't think much of me, Melusina?'

'I know so little, Tempest.'

'In any case, here comes the cub at last. You shall see whether my son has been taught to hold a knife and fork, and to put on his trousers right side before, as you do not seem to anticipate.'

'Tempest, you are deplorable. Is this my nephew?'

Lady Malham, wrought up to expect the worst, was obviously taken aback by the apparition of a young man whose manner, instead of being lumpish, was more or less easy.

'I am sorry if you are disappointed, Melusina, but this is my son and your nephew. St. John, this is your aunt. She is vexed because you have not come down to dinner in shooting-boots and a smock-frock.'

'Oh, well!' exclaimed St. John. 'If that's all! If I'd known, I would have, of course.'

Lady Malham bit her lip. She was seriously angry with herself for all the foolish expectations into which her romantic feelings had led her.

'Really, I apologize to you both,' she said. 'I have been abominably foolish. I cannot imagine why I expected you to have forgotten how to wash and shave. I suppose I must have been reading "Wuthering Heights" or "Jane Eyre." You don't tie pokers into knots, St. John, do you?'

'No, Aunt Melusina, worse luck!' he replied. He had hoped to shine more brightly than this, but this stately lady tied his tongue. He would do better at dinner.

'I am sorry to say that I have no fault to find with the result. Nephew, you are a fraud. I could find half a dozen recognisable originals of you in Half Moon Street without crossing the road any time in the afternoon.'

'You see, Melusina,' put in her brother, 'how hopelessly incompetent I have shown myself to educate a boy. He is nothing but a backwoodsman.'

'Be generous to me, Tempest. I am a very foolish and humiliated woman. Take me away quickly, and give me food.'

'You are an honest antagonist, my dear,' said her brother, offering his arm.

'Unlike an Englishman, an Englishwoman knows when she is beaten,' answered his sister, as they went in to dinner, where St. John meant to surprise her.

To Lady Malham, accustomed to the rather glum traditions of the Ladon family, where conversation was held a mincing and despicable art, a Ladon who talked was an astonishing portent. St. John's slender build and dark hair had been a first shock to her belief in the Saxon ruggedness of outline on which masculine Ladons had always been wont to pride themselves. The manner that he had manufactured for himself, so feverishly pleasant, and so different from his father's, now emerged from behind his first shyness and completed the surprise. Moreover, several of the things he said began to give signs of cleverness, and the Ladons, though never devoid of intelligence, had always

shunned conversational cleverness as an ill-bred wile of the social advertiser, to which no one of assured position would ever condescend. Altogether the poor lady felt inclined at times to pinch herself in wonder as to whether lobster mayonnaise had not pitchforked her into some more than usually perverse nightmare. Her nephew, of whom she had expected a speechless British uncouthness, almost recalled to her some of the London chatterers to whom, as signs of their age, her dignity had never yet become quite reconciled.

When the meal was finished, the three returned to the drawing-room together, which pleased the visitor. Then her brother, whose air through dinner had been bristly with ill-concealed pride, made some transparent excuse to be rid of his son. As soon as he had gone, Tempest Ladon turned to his sister.

‘Well?’ he said, in arrogant expectance.

But Lady Malham, who had ends in view, and whose mental balance had been restored by food, was no longer to be lured into rhapsodies.

‘On the whole,’ she replied deliberately, ‘I think it might easily be worse.’

Tempest Ladon’s face clouded angrily.

‘Is that all you have to say? Ah, Melusina, how well I know you! You only say that because you have had no hand in his education yourself. I don’t see how you can find any fault in him. Now, honestly, can you, Melusina—honestly now?’

Mr. Ladon, when on the conversational war-path, was apt to be a daunting and irresistible figure. But his sister, armed by memories of former conflicts, knew that arrogance was the best front to show to arrogance.

‘Really,’ she said, ‘you talk like a proud suburban mother. Of course, you cannot see any fault in your son. Whom have you seen these five-and-twenty years to com-

pare him with? The curate, perhaps, at the lectern. It is absurd to discuss a young man of five-and-twenty as if he were just of age.'

Her brother held out.

'It doesn't seem to me that I have lost much, Melusina,' he said. 'But I suppose things have altered in London since my time. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry is as good as a gentleman, I understand.'

'My dear Tempest, for mercy's sake don't talk like Marie Corelli translated into English. It is always a mistake to speak of things one does not know. I am not going to offer you my views on agriculture, so please don't offer me yours on the world.'

'For my part, I think a Ladon who doesn't sit through a meal as stupid as a fish is a blessed relief. Do you remember family conversation in my father's time, Melusina?'

'I don't. There wasn't any. You are quite right: St. John is an immense improvement, no doubt, on the stupid old Ladons of our time. But really, Tempest, there is no need to get violent when I suggest that even he would be the better for seeing a little of his contemporaries. You cannot think it good for any man to spend five-and-twenty years—the best five-and-twenty years of his life, too—mewed up in a moorland barrack with no one but his father and an occasional gamekeeper to talk to. It stands to reason that some of his intelligence must get rusty.'

'Now you are betraying your ignorance, my dear. St. John is not in the habit of confiding in the gamekeepers.'

'Well, I wonder at it, then. He *must* want to confide in someone. Why, if I had lived here for twenty years, I should have taken to spending my days in the servants' hall. Oh, Tempest, is it possible you do not understand that a human being under seventy wants other human beings under seventy to talk to—at least, if he has anything in his head to say, as St. John probably has?'

'I should have thought a father would have been good enough company for anyone,' replied her brother doggedly. 'But I dare say I am wrong. I am not modern. I cannot see why he should want anything more.'

Lady Malham wrung her beautiful hands.

'You say that just in the old way,' she wailed, 'as if your not seeing why a thing should be so must naturally prevent it from ever being so. One does not see *why* a vast number of things exist, and yet one has to face the fact that they *do*. I cannot see why St. John should be so absolutely unlike his father, and so absolutely like his mother and all her people, but I have to accept the fact for all that.'

'He *is* like his mother, don't you think?' said her brother, referring to his dead wife with hesitation.

'The very living image of her! Dear Elena, how sweet she was! All the more reason, surely, Tempest, for giving the poor soul some chance in life. Do you think Elena would have liked her only child to sit here on your lap all his life, and be bored to death?'

There fell a pause.

'You strike hard, Melusina,' said the other at last. 'You always did.'

'We have fighting blood, you and I, Tempest. Dear me! how natural it seems, even after all these years, to be quarrelling with you again just in the same old way!'

'A week ago I should have turned you out of the house if you had talked to me like this, Melusina.'

'I very much doubt it. As a matter of fact, even you have felt the sameness of your life. You are quite glad to have a fresh person to thresh things out with, and scold and browbeat. You know you are enjoying a good battle with all your heart.'

The rugged features relaxed.

'Life has made you of polished steel, Melusina,' said her brother. 'You have a fine edge, there's no denying. You

were always the cleverest of us. Blanda and I were fools to you.'

'Blanda, poor dear! would be a fool to almost anyone out of a feeble-witted Home. She is the first Ladon who has ever married a parson. That speaks for itself.'

'There is no need to blaspheme the Church you belong to, Melusina.'

'How full of angles you have become, Tempest! Have you become an unpolished corner of the temple? Have you "taken religion"?''

'That is my affair, Melusina. Please respect my convictions, even if you are too much a fashionable woman of the world to have any of your own.'

'My good brother, I decline to be preached down. Of course, we all have the highest respect for clergymen and that, in church. But in our day we did not think of bothering about them outside, much less of marrying them. . . . I see you are getting purple. Let us change the subject.'

'I won't believe you are as soulless as you sound, Melusina. You always had a gift for making me angry.'

'I have had to do many more difficult things in my time, Tempest. Let us come to the point, after our little digression on poor Blanda's intelligence. . . . I cannot stay here long. . . . In fact, I must be back in town by Thursday.'

'And you want to take my son away from me, Melusina?'

'And are you going to stand obstinately in my way and—his?' answered Lady Malham gently.

Suddenly the fire of her brother's attitude collapsed.

'I knew it would come,' he said. 'I suppose it had to be. Well, take him, Melusina, and make what you can of him. I know he wants to go. I feel it in every nerve.'

'There's no need to be tragic,' said the other calmly. 'It's not to be a lifelong separation, you know. He will come back to you at the end of the season.'

'Yes, I dare say he will. But he will come back a stranger to me.'

'My dear Tempest, we are all strangers, really, even to our nearest and dearest,' answered Lady Malham. 'Don't imagine that two months' absence will do more than alter the quality of your estrangement. Each of us lives in a world of his own, and he cannot give the key to his best friend, however much he may try, Tempest. Honestly, has your son the key of your life, or you of his?'

'You kill relationships if you analyze them so cruelly, Melusina,' replied her brother with rough agitation. 'At any rate, if we are strangers, we are on speaking terms.'

'And that you will never cease to be.'

'Not if he learns another language out in the world?'

'One's heart, Tempest, has always an Esperanto of its own.'

'You speak as you hope, Melusina, not as you think.'

'If one did not, life would be intolerable. Oh, don't be afraid. All your son wants is to slough a skin or two, and get rid of some of his ideas in exchange for others. At present, in this atmosphere, all his pores are closed. His life is unhealthy. Give him a breath of free air among his contemporaries, and then, even if he learns to chatter a few words in a new language, he will come back to you cured, and thankful to be talking again to you in the old.'

'Yes, you make it smooth. But you know—what I am afraid of?'

'Of course I know. But that is a peril you won't escape by keeping your son locked up in a hermitage. What must be, will be. Is it not better to give him a chance of choosing for himself than to drive him into the arms of the game-keeper's daughter?'

'But are you sure . . . so absolutely certain that it must be?'

'Remember what you were, Tempest—what we all are. Of course it must be, sooner or later.'

‘But I could make it later. Why should it happen until I am dead?’

‘Ah, why? And so your selfishness is to starve your son of his best years. Your selfishness is to make a useless monk of him, while the warmth of his blood is running to waste. And then, by the time you are dead, Tempest, your son will feel the opportunities and the youth he has lost. And he will hate your memory. That is all you will gain—a barren and merciless triumph now, perhaps, and then the sure knowledge that your son will be thankful over your coffin.’

‘Melusina, you talk nothing but black darkness. Have we parents no rights, then, in the world?’

‘None. We have only privileges, and they depend entirely on the goodwill of those who grant them. Let us make friends of the mammon of unrighteousness. Remember our parents, and what we thought of them.’

‘They were not our friends. I am St. John’s friend.’

‘I am only advising you to remain so. Give him his chance.’

‘Melusina, do you want my son to marry your—Emma—Esther—what’s her name?’

‘Enid? No. Besides, I might want it with all my might without being able to bring it about. That will depend on Enid alone.’

‘So the experienced mother is as much a stranger to her daughter as I to my son?’

‘Yes, and a friendly stranger. I have bought my daughter’s friendship at the price of all interference in her private concerns. Otherwise I might have been her mother, perhaps, but I should never have been her friend.’

‘You are a wonderfully wise woman, Melusina, I suppose. Of course, you know that you will get your way with me.’

‘Of course I know it. And you knew it even before I came—before I knew it.’

St. John Ladon entered the room with a hamper in his hand.

'Here is a weird thing, father,' he said; 'Mrs. Budgell has sent you up this, with a note. I am going to open it.'

'Who is Mrs. Budgell?' asked Lady Malham, scenting a designing mother. But her brother was deciphering the note.

'Apparently, she has sent me an animal,' he said at last. 'Whatever has possessed her to do so I cannot conceive. But she seems to think that it will do my rheumatism good in some mysterious way. It lives on beef and water. Open the hamper, St. John.'

'But who is the woman?'

'The Vicar's wife. A good soul, I believe. We see her in church. What an absurd creature!'

The hamper was now opened, and, with a faint mew of protest, its occupant emerged, and almost immediately took refuge beneath a cabinet, where, in the darkness, nothing was visible but a pair of flaming eyes.

'A Siamese cat,' said Lady Malham; 'Sylvia Dale has a whole leash of them. She adores them. She has quite given up children since she had them. She says she finds the cats so much more companionable. That one looks rather a nice little person.'

'I suppose I must keep it,' said her brother. 'Mrs. Budgell evidently meant to be kind. And besides, perhaps,' he added, with a grim smile, 'I shall find it useful as a companion, after all . . . St. John, your aunt wants you to go to London with her on Thursday for a bit. No, don't make a piece of work about it. Ring the bell, and let us have that animal fished out and taken to the kitchen.'

'But do you really want me, Aunt Melusina?' asked St. John, returning from the bell.

'I am not in the habit of inviting people I don't want,' said his aunt.

'You know you will be glad to go, St. John,' said his father.

'Not if you would rather I stayed here.'

'Certainly not. Do you suppose the house will fall to pieces if you go away from Saturday to Monday? I assure you, we shall all get on perfectly without you. So that is settled, and I want no more words on the subject—no another one, Melusina. Off you both go on Thursday, and I must try to survive for a time without my nursemaid.'

At this point the butler entered, and decorously received instructions about the kitten. In the excitement of reclaiming the new-comer from the depths of the darkness beneath the cabinet, further discussion of momentous topics lapsed. At length an empurpled and ruffled Barclay rose from the floor, grasping the kitten by the scruff of its neck. The victim hung limp from his grasp, with an air of indignant petrification. Having heard his final directions, Barclay retired with his prey. Lady Malham then seized the opportunity to say good-night, and was escorted into the hall by her nephew, who in turn, when his aunt had been safely disposed of, retired to his room, determined not to give his father the opportunity of reopening the vexed question of the London visit. Mr. Ladon, left alone in the drawing-room, noticed the evasion with a grim smile, and tormented himself by considering it a symptom of his son's passionate desire to get away from the house and its owner. He had the unfortunate gift of remarking his own unreasonableness, without the counterbalancing endowment of being able to allow for its effect on others.

Among Mr. Ladon's qualities, however, was a certain power of finality. Having decided on his son's departure, he neither alluded to the matter again nor suffered anyone else to do so. Both his sister and his son were grateful to him for this, though St. John felt that perhaps he had suffered himself to be lured into Lady Malham's conspiracy

with almost discreditable promptitude. Lady Malham, for her part, was glad to find the remainder of her visit made so smooth and easy. Having realized what subjects to avoid or to circumvent, she talked long and happily with her brother, without rushing into unpleasant contact with his prejudices. Small difficulties, of course, she met.

It was disconcerting to discover that her brother, whose literary explorations had, in the old days, been confined to Whyte Melville and Jorrocks, now spent much of his time in the mazes of patristic theology, and betrayed what she considered an almost bohemian intimacy with the œcumenical councils of the early Eastern and Western Churches. At first, having discovered that her brother, finding family ties less repulsive than he had long feared, meditated asking his sister Blanda, with her husband the Dean, to stay with him for the bazaar, she cherished a hope that he might merely be acquiring this dreary learning with a view to conversing with the Dean. But she soon found that it was his natural study, and that he took a deep and sombre pleasure in the works of all the more damnatory theologians. Tertullian he had very near his heart; Cyril was a kindred spirit; and the niceties of Byzantine heresy presented no difficulty to his critical soul, as he walked the perilous tight-rope of Christian orthodoxy.

Lady Malham was almost shocked at the incongruity of such dangerous erudition with the traditions of a great Yorkshire squire. Such matters, she considered, should be left to the expert, much as dentistry or medicine. Furthermore, she was ruffled, when Sunday came round, to find that she was expected to walk at least three miles to Mr. Budgell's church. She made an effort to commandeer a carriage, but her brother put down the project with presbyterian decision. Then, of course, being a woman of decision, she declined to go at all, and was left alone in solitary state, to look after the almost deserted house. She rejoiced in her escape, but

the very fact that she had been expected to do so unheard-of a thing as walk to a distant church had a most deleterious effect on her nerves. Nor were they restored when lunch-time arrived. Lady Malham was one of the many women in town whose Sunday lunches were admitted to be supremely desirable. What, then, was her smothered indignation on being confronted with cold mutton and salad, when at last the household had returned from its devotions! As she languidly pecked at her uninteresting beetroot, she promised herself that St. John should certainly learn a very much more civilized mode of life when once she had got him under her own eye in London.

However, in the afternoon she gathered from a private conversation with her nephew that he would by no means be reluctant to learn the ethics of Sunday diet, and this concord of sympathies so reinforced her self-respect that she was able to sit out an evening meal of the same chilly and unsatisfactory nature without audible repinings. None the less, such small flies in the ointment helped to convince her that the sweetness of renewed intimacy with Ottemer might have its drawbacks, and enabled her to look forward to her departure on Thursday without inconsolable sorrow. Her brother was all that was amiable to her, but the society of a religious enthusiast was a strain. On the appointed day, accordingly, she took serene leave of Mr. Ladon, and returned to London, accompanied by her nephew, whose pleasure at the prospect was but ill-dissembled beneath the keen eye of his father's jealousy.

Life and death combine to teach us how easily, after all, we can do without even those we hold dearest. Bereavement soon becomes a habit; and a habit is, necessarily, a thing endurable. But the formation of it is an agony in its time; and the first pangs of separation from the well-beloved are, to a mind fixed on unreality, bitter as those accompanying the renunciation of drunkenness or any other selfish

and ephemeral attachment. The house seemed very dead and empty to Mr. Ladon during the first days of his son's absence; nor was his feeling of desolation lightened by his unconquerable suspicion that his son had been glad to go, and would certainly enjoy himself in the world outside. Not for anything would he have had his son find dulness and disappointment in his new life; and yet,—and yet, despite his most magnanimous efforts, he knew that he would not have been quite sorry if such had been the case. Through long, lonely evenings he sat brooding in his chair, remembering with angry bitterness the gay beauty of his dead wife, reincarnate in the son who had stolen it away from Ottemer to display carelessly in London to fools who had never known the original. He tried to fight down his lonely jealousy, definitely arraigining himself as the most selfish and unreasonable of men; but our desires have made it impossible for our feelings ever to be under the same control as that into which reason can be brought. And Mr. Ladon's jealousy remained, till London appeared to his imagination like some horrible, beautiful woman, easily winning away the heart of his son.

Suddenly, as he sat in the late evening, revolving his dreary meditations, and feeling oppressed by the silent vacancy of the great room, a faint voice penetrated to his notice. Looking round, he perceived that he had a guest. Newly emerged from beneath a bookcase stood Mrs. Budgell's kitten, a hesitating visitor, fixing anxious round blue eyes upon her host in an unblinking stare. The small creature, looking smaller than ever on the broad expanse of carpet, stood motionless, ready to flee at the least movement of hostility. Seeing none, she opened a rose-pink mouth and once more delicately mewed. Her voice was a faint protest against the indignity of having to advance without formal invitation. Her well-bred little utterance demanded a welcome.

'Puss, puss,' said Mr. Ladon, at a loss as to how to deal with so lady-like a person.

This, however, was enough. With deliberate grace and slowly waving tail, the kitten advanced with a tiger's slinking gait, never removing her eyes from their object. Arrived beside his chair, she looked up at him, and once more mewed. This time her voice indicated a gentle friendliness that was prepared to mature into cordiality. After a moment's pause, she collected herself into a bunch and leapt lightly to his knee. Having arrived, she commenced to purr voluminously like a kettle, and, extending herself along his knee in the attitude of a couchant lion, she began rhythmically inserting her claws into his leg with a sublime confidence in his endurance that struck her victim as magnificent. He, for his part, tickled her throat with an awkward and inexperienced hand. She gave him every encouragement to continue, and by degrees his touch grew defter and more satisfactory. Gathering courage, he ventured, at a peculiarly enthusiastic dig into his knee, to imprison the peccant paw for a moment. His visitor mildly squeaked, and then, finding her paw released, was contented to moderate the ardour with which she punctuated her contentment. Ere long Mr. Ladon found a pleasure in entertaining his visitor that beguiled him into forgetting his loneliness, although he secretly derided himself for the ease of his capture, and compared his case with crusty old bachelors of the Pathetic School of fiction, who conceal beneath stern exteriors a disposition of milk and honey, and are invariably seduced into amiability by the ministrations of an orphan child, a puppy, or a kitten. When Barclay appeared at length with a note on a salver, he was surprised to find his master engrossed in the company of a purring cat.

'How did this creature come here?' asked Mr. Ladon gruffly.

The butler's tone expressed apology :

'I am sure I am very sorry she has got in again,' he answered. 'The fact is, sir, she always contrives to find her way. I am afraid she does not like us in the house-keeper's room, sir, and, as for the under-servants, she will have nothing to do with them. The cook has done all she can for her, but the cat don't seem to take to her nohow.'

'In future she will live with me,' said Mr. Ladon. 'You will bring her meals in here. What is her name?'

'The cook, sir, has been calling her Eliza,' replied Barclay, 'but I cannot say as she seems sharp about answering to the name.'

'Thanks, Barclay; that will do. I'll take her to my room when I go.'

The butler retired, wondering at the kitten's conquest.

'Eliza will never do for a drawing-room cat, will it, little puss?' said Mr. Ladon, gently pulling the ears of his beati-fied guest. 'I shall call you Lisa, my lady—do you hear?'

Lisa purred with redoubled ardour. Mr. Ladon, in a spasm of consciousness, smiled bitterly to think how aptly Mrs. Budgell had foreseen the future in divining that he would need and cherish the company of a kitten. Then he gathered the miniature lioness to his arms in a soft ball, and, rising, left the room.

And thus the lady Lisa came by her own.

CHAPTER IV

THE gods are ironical ; they give with one hand, and with the other they take away. If Mr. Ladon could have seen what was happening to the hearts of his old friends, he would not so serenely have enjoyed the acquisition of a new one. For, while at Ottemer Mr. Ladon was making acquaintance with Lady Lisa, that same evening saw momentous happenings in London.

Lady Malham had found that her nephew took to polite life as a duck to water. He was evidently determined to enjoy himself, and the pleasures of the world were new to him. Consequently, he threw himself into them with an enthusiasm that not all his aunt's precepts could curb into a decorous appearance of pleased indifference. Especially did he appreciate the charms of the theatre. He had not yet made the inevitable discovery that musical comedy is the one development of the British drama that deserves to be taken seriously, being neither comic nor musical. Accordingly, he attended every kind of performance with joy, and did not let his fine rapture be damaged by any perception of ineptitude.

Now, neither Lady Malham nor her daughter disliked the theatre. Lady Malham, in fact, piqued herself on a nice critical faculty, and was ready to go to an intelligent play as often as London managers allowed the chance of doing so. Thus her inclinations jumped with her nephew's, and she found herself able to entertain him without the dreaded necessity of being bored herself.

On the evening in question Lady Malham might have been seen, a notable figure, in the third row of the stalls. Her nephew was on her right, and on her other side sat her daughter, Lady Enid Kirby, a small, pale girl, with thin red lips, who managed a leash of tame men, and considered her mother nice but *vieux jeu*. At present most of her attention was monopolized by her newest man, a dramatic poet who sat on her left, and was busy giving details of a play that he had just written for her, in which she was to act a picturesque Klytemnestra part in aid of a fashionable charity. Neither the poet nor the charity really interested her very much, but she was quite ready to put up with either or both for the sake of the Klytemnestra part, which interested her enormously. Accordingly she bent her fair head graciously towards the poet, and, as he ardently expounded his work, suffered her cool, gray eyes to wander over the gathering audience in front.

Lady Malham's cult of the intelligent drama had good hopes of being rewarded that night. For the work which they were to witness was a unique production by the famous Mrs. Felix Poltwhistle, Archbishop Poltwhistle's seventh daughter-in-law, whose masterpieces, by dint of being strenuously dull, had arrived at the glory of being everywhere hailed as intelligent. That great woman herself was to be seen in the dim recesses of a box, draped in a waistless robe of sage green cashmere, with large sleeves of emerald velvet, and a pendent zone of strange coloured pebbles. On her broad forehead hung an imitation Renaissance jewel. The whole house gazed up to her with reverence, as worshippers adoring a national institution. Her box was dark with episcopal-looking personages, into whose attendant ears she was seen from time to time to drop some pearl of wisdom. Her noble expression of serene seriousness, and the unaffected simplicity of her swelling brow, were matters of enthusiastic comment to all that beheld the new Hypatia.

The theatre, meanwhile, was filling rapidly. Lady Malham, who had not realized that, this performance being of a special order, its audience would practically be that of an ordinary first night, was rendered speechless after a time with amazement at the weird people that she saw defiling before her eyes.

'I cannot think what has happened,' she gasped to her nephew, as three enormously stout young Jewesses, deeply *décolletée* in virginal white silk adorned with a thousand artful tucks, rustled and squeezed along to their places. 'It feels like a nightmare. Where, under heaven, can those astounding women have come from?'

The huge maidens carried their square and flouncing bodies to the centre of the row, where they proceeded to settle. Having established themselves in their places, they began to munch chocolates and exchange shrill comments with two dear friends in a front row.

'There you are, you dear thing!' ejaculated the second Jewess, and an enthusiastic conversation was initiated with a sparkling creature three rows behind.

'Oh, look! there's Jackie!' suddenly screamed the eldest, wildly waving to a young person in a shiny silk tartan with eight rows of artificial pearls entwined about her figure. 'Come over here, Jackie—do, darling!'

Jackie thereupon pressed ruthlessly towards them, and Lady Malham stiffened more and more with the horror of conscious isolation.

'I don't see a soul I know,' she said in horror. 'What a den of lions! Look at this good creature in plush, with the stole of . . . Are they winkle-shells, Enid? Can you see?'

'Three-and-six the chain,' answered Lady Enid tersely. 'Sort of cowries, I think. Really, my dear, what possessed us to come to this show?'

The aforesaid lady, the wife of an influential editor,

passed to her place, and Lady Enid resumed her discussion with the poet.

After this came by a little man, like a small erect pink porpoise, three feet high, in a blond wig, and on his heels a splendid Father Christmas, carrying a plaid shawl. St. John Ladon was thoroughly enjoying the spectacle.

'But I thought one *had* to see this thing of Mrs. Polt-whistle's,' ejaculated Lady Malham in the voice of a lost child. 'I had no idea that nobody, literally nobody, would be here.'

'We might have known that she would have sent tickets to every house in Maida Vale and St. John's Wood,' replied Lady Enid with some acerbity, as a small and exceedingly pretty girl squeezed past her, dressed mainly in diamonds on a foundation of azure velvet.

Her man followed close behind—an overweening sportsman of the least desirable type, in whose vast expanse of patterned white shirt there gleamed a solitaire like a little tart.

'One ought to have taken a box,' ejaculated Lady Malham, as she followed them wrathfully with her gaze. 'Really, the stalls are quite impossible on these sort of occasions.'

'Nothing like seeing life,' answered her nephew.

'Don't call this life,' said Lady Malham. 'One will never meet any of these people again, that's one comfort. Why don't the stupid play begin?'

By which it may be seen that Lady Malham's temper was wearing a little thin. Meanwhile the house had nearly made up its complement. All the strange wizened ladies from the suburbs, with their disordered hair and their high bodices of glacé silk richly adorned with ropes of shells, had taken their appointed places; all the well-fed men of semitic appearance, whose presence sheds so rich a glow across our first-nights, had pressed by them into their several stalls. The boxes were occupied by the wives of

actor-managers in astonishing gowns, or by hilarious parties of diners, whose ladies wore large facsimiles of birds and animals in diamonds on their wildly-frizzled heads, or at frequent intervals over their generously-displayed persons. Though, as Lady Malham upheld, there was literally nobody in the theatre, the air was hot and heavy with the essence of warm, closely-packed, full-fed and eupeptic humanity. The uneasy glare of the place throbbed with the heady atmosphere of many painted, perfumed women. Only two seats immediately beyond St. John were still left empty by the time his aunt had arrived at the end of her strictures.

Suddenly St. John Ladon turned to her with interest.

'Look!' he said; 'who are these two women coming in? Can you tell me?'

'Don't ask me to tell you who anyone is in this absurd bear-garden,' replied his aunt with asperity. 'Where? . . . Well, by a most extraordinary chance I can tell you, after all. It is Lady Morland and her cousin. Good gracious! they are coming into our row. I shall have to speak to them, I suppose. She is a truly detestable woman, Lady Morland.'

'Yes, but the girl is wonderfully beautiful,' answered St. John.

'In that extraordinary gown? Enid, here's someone who thinks Barbara Lancaster handsome.'

'Beautiful colour scheme, isn't it?' replied Lady Enid in tones of penetrating acidity; 'she has acquired the finest reputation in London for colour-blindness, St. John dear, and that's an achievement nowadays, I can assure you.'

But her cousin was taking no notice. His whole attention was fixed on the new-comers. Even his innocence could not help recognising that Barbara Lancaster was deliberately provoking attention, and enjoying the consciousness of it. She moved forward slowly and with elaborate grace, a very tall and slender figure in pale-blue

satin, with a long scarf of tender purple cast loosely round her bare white shoulders. She carried her height with a deliberate assumption of extreme languor that conveyed a startling impression of insolence.

Whatever her style might be, it was not that of the strange people between whose rows she was moving so arrogantly. Her outlines were too clear-cut, her repose of manner too flagrant. She wore her head bowed as if the weight of hair, that was her chief glory, were too heavy for the long and slender neck; and beneath drooping lids her eyes, of a fierce blue, wandered disdainfully over the gowns of the women she was passing. Her skin was brilliantly white; her beautiful, scornful mouth was brilliantly red, and her complexion colourless with the radiant pallor often seen in company of such hair. For the hair that so burdened her was of a most ardent golden red, parted in the middle, and rippling low over her broad, shallow forehead, to be caught into a rough mass behind, with an ostentatious pretence of careless simplicity. Altogether, a girl of extreme beauty according to some tastes, though her traditions and her manner seemed rather near akin to those of the heroine in a sensational novel. Behind her came a very stout woman in an aggressively pink frock, a-twinkle with a multiplicity of diamond chains and brooches. As they passed, Lady Malham shook hands without enthusiasm.

‘You are just in time, Lady Morland,’ she said. ‘Your stalls, I see, are the only ones left.’

‘So amusin’ to arrive late, don’t you find?’ answered the pink lady effusively; ‘everyone stares at one so. So amusin’.’

Lady Malham took no notice, but faced the inevitable.

‘Lady Morland, let me introduce my nephew, Mr. Ladon. Mr. Ladon, Miss Lancaster.’

Amid salutations the two new-comers took their places,

Barbara taking pains to be next to the young man, a position she always preferred, and which she and her cousin, having the same tastes, usually disputed bitterly. On this occasion, however, there was no time for Lady Morland to discover that she wanted to be near 'dear Lady Malham,' for, hardly had Barbara sat down, than the lights were extinguished, and the curtain rose, leaving St. John in the darkness, but consoled by the near neighbourhood of the beauty.

There is no need to detail the genealogical fortunes of the royal family which Mrs. Felix Poltwhistle's genius now revealed in a group upon the stage. Suffice it to say that all the sons and daughters were soon discovered to be children of the most diverse and improbable people. Tears were shed in abundance, and a comic American widow flitted irrelevantly through the act, emitting at intervals the most laboriously excogitated funninesses. Finally, the queen, a lady of extreme amiability and a weak heart, fainted away on being too roughly reprov'd for her erotic eccentricities, and the curtain fell on the pathetic tableau of an inanimate black-velvet mother being upheld by three white-muslin princesses, whose angry eyes were fixed upon the brutal king, their supposititious parent.

Up went the lights, and the theatre buzzed with talk. The actors pretended to hear loud applause, and the curtain was raised and let down rapidly again three or four times, a proceeding of which nobody took very much notice.

'You don't clap?' said St. John to his neighbour.

'On these occasions I think it more tactful to leave that sort of thing to the author's relations,' answered Barbara; 'what else are they there for? Besides, clapping annoys me.'

Her voice was no disappointment to the listener. It was rich, deliberate, and low in tone, without hurry or clack.

'I shall always remember this play painfully,' went on St. John, 'as the first performance at which I was ever bored. Don't you find it rather dreary rot, Miss Lancaster?'

Barbara allowed her piercing blue eyes to open widely and meet his gaze in surprise.

'But of course,' she said. 'Why in the world did you suppose one came to this kind of thing? One wants to see sometimes how bad a play *can* be. But if you will let me give you some advice, Mr. Ladon, you won't express your opinions quite so loudly just at present.'

St. John was fluttered at the thought that he had made some terrible mistake.

'Why not?' he asked; 'have I said anything appalling?'

'Your innocence is beautiful!' rejoined Barbara; 'I am sure you must be new to London. What do you imagine is the first step to take when one has a play coming out?'

'I have no notion.'

'Why, to send tickets to all one's sisters and one's cousins and one's aunts, of course, even to the third and fourth generation, on both sides of the family.'

'Then . . .?'

'Tell me, did you hear anyone clap at the end of the act? . . . Did you hear anyone laugh when the American widow sat down on the cup of tea?'

'Yes, I thought so.'

'And you did not wonder why on earth they did it? Listen: the lady with the puce-coloured wig on my right is Mrs. Poltwhistle's aunt; the woman in the tartan blouse at the end of the row is her sister-in-law. Her grandmother is superintending the row in front of us, and her three nephews have charge of the applause in the row behind. The dress-circle is occupied by the Archbishop's chaplains, their wives and relations, peppered discreetly up and down. In the gallery are the family butlers with a party of their friends. The rest of the allied archiepiscopal

households are scattered like leaven through the upper-circle. To come back to the stalls: there are three of Mrs. Poltwhistle's aunts in the front row, a brother-in-law with his wife at each end of all the others, two cousins immediately under our noses, and three of the Archbishop's maiden sisters immediately behind. Now, can you wonder that somebody laughed when the American widow sat down on the cup of tea?

'By Jove! what a packed jury! What an enormous family!'

'Yes, it comes in very useful if one wants not only to write bad plays, but to have them produced. Very likely that was why she married the Archbishop's son. And most of them are dramatic critics too. Also, we shall all probably have little slips of paper given us soon, on which to record our opinions of the play, and Mrs. Poltwhistle will claim a huge success for it on the strength of the family suffrage. Goodness! her relations in the theatre far outnumber us poor feeble units. We are nowhere. So please make your comments humbly, in a lowered voice, unless you want to be torn in pieces like Hypatia, and ponderously rebuked in all the newspapers that are edited by the Archbishop's sons and daughters.

'Shish, shish!' said the aunt with the puce-coloured wig, in a truculent hiss, looking venomously towards Miss Lancaster. Barbara gave her a sleepy-lidded smile, then turned again to St. John.

'Even conversation, you see, is regarded as a blasphemy,' she remarked. 'We are to sit quiet and meditate over the beauty of what we have seen, and the profundity of what is yet to come. I wonder they even allow those immense Jewesses to chump chocolates in such a brazen manner.'

Lady Malham noticed with alarm how the siren was monopolizing her nephew.

'St. John dear,' she said, 'do go and ask that nice-

looking waitress with the Alsatian bow to bring Enid and me a cup of coffee, will you ?'

Barbara looked at him with a meaning smile as he rose reluctantly. But he was immediately pulled down again by a voice behind.

'I beg your pardon,' said the Archbishop's eldest sister, 'but the play, we believe, is about to recommence.'

'You see,' said Barbara, 'we are hemmed in. There is no escape. Bold-faced intimidation, I call it.'

St. John turned apologetically towards his aunt, and sat down again. Not a moment too soon. Amid a reverential murmur from all whom he now knew to be connections of Mrs. Poltwhistle, the curtain rose on the suffering queen, to whom lachrymose daughters were ministering as she lay upon a sofa. She had not wept and suffered very long before St. John felt a certain drowsiness creep over him, and knew no more. A buzz of admiration woke him at last. Barbara was looking at him with an envious smile, and the lights were up.

'How extraordinarily clever of you to do that!' she said. 'I am torn with envy. I tried hard to follow your example. I never have been able to, though. Years ago, before I gave up going to church, I used to have the same difficulty.'

'It came quite naturally,' said St. John. 'Good heavens! two more acts! What has happened all this time?'

'The queen has been turned out of doors by the king,' answered Barbara, 'and we shall soon see her keeping a lodging-house in Soho, I believe. Her daughters are typewriters now in ducal households.'

'You are joking: you are shamefully abusing my weakness.'

'Far be it from me to joke on such serious topics. Mrs. Poltwhistle's works are high above the trammels of probability or ordinary human nature. I already have a presentiment that the queen will be carried off by that weak heart to slow, sad music at the end of the last act.'

Lady Malham saw that the case was hopeless. She and Lady Enid were to be left coffeeless, unless the poet should take pity on them. Lady Morland, for her part, rejoiced in the impression that Barbara had evidently made on Lady Malham's nephew. She foresaw invitations to dinner and tea in Eaton Square, and a delightful intimacy with the woman who had long declined to know her. For many seasons it had been one of Lady Morland's ambitions to knit friendly relations with the stately lady whose set was so far above her own. Lady Morland had made innumerable advances, always to be politely rebuffed. Now at last, however, she saw her dream made practicable, and rejoiced.

Lady Malham, meanwhile, saw the same prospect from a different point of view, and with bitterly contrasting feelings. Carefully as she had always avoided all but the barest contact with Coralie Morland, it was disastrous in the extreme that her nephew's evident attraction by Barbara bade fair to drag his aunt into closer relations with the accursed thing. Lady Malham sat very upright, looking taller than ever, and diligently refrained from casting an eye in St. John's direction.

Her dread was justified. When the play had at last concluded, leaving the queen defunct in a blue light, with all her daughters and their ducal bridegrooms grouped around her, Lady Malham heard her enemy invite St. John to call, in a shrill and penetrating voice.

'Do come,' she said, wriggling with cordiality. 'Always in after five. And you, too, dear Lady Malham! I have not seen you for an age.'

'No, we have not met for a long time,' answered Lady Malham tepidly, while her nephew warmly accepted Lady Morland's invitation on his own account.

Then, in the confusion of a general stampede towards the doors, the two parties lost sight of each other.

CHAPTER V

IT is now more than a score of years since Hubert Hereward Ecgfrith Tylney, third Viscount Woodston, and Earl of Morland, was distinguished in the ranks of amateur cricketers. This eminence gave great pleasure to his mother, Honoria, and his three elderly spinster sisters, the ladies Anne, Maria, and Isabella Tylney; but their joy was changed to wailing and recrimination when this same innocent pursuit led the footsteps of their dear Morland into the snares of Miss Coralie Wimbush. It was during a summer tour that Lord Morland's eleven found itself one day in Shropshire, being lavishly entertained by a certain Mr. Wimbush, of whom little appeared to be known beyond his enthusiasm for the game and his enthusiastic hospitality for all that played it. And there the bright eyes of his daughter Coralie wrought such havoc in the heart of Lord Morland that nought would serve him but to make her his Countess, as Mr. Wimbush somewhat magniloquently put it. A shriek of wrath arose from the whole Tylney family. Lady Morland, threatened prematurely with dowagerhood, descended wrathfully upon Shropshire. Nor was her indignation appeased by the sight of her prospective daughter-in-law, and the discovery that the father was not even a wealthy manufacturer, but a retired bookmaker, who was living splendidly upon his accumulated capital. As for Coralie herself, though Lady Morland could not deny her vulgar prettiness, she gasped before the spectacle of her bead-chains, her polychromatic hats, her flagrant

frocks, and suffered the sound of Miss Wimbush's shrill cockney voice with as grievous an air of patience as that with which she endured the heralding breeze of cherry-blossom that accompanied the destined peeress everywhere, and ran before her like a linkboy. But tears, moralizings, entreaties, availed nothing. Honoria, Countess of Morland, must needs retire to her dower house, and make way for her successor at Northanger.

This tragic episode in the house of Tylney would have little bearing on our narrative were it not that the elevation of Coralie Wimbush 'spread wide joy among a large circle' of totally inconsiderable people, and, in particular, enabled the Reverend Grosvenor Lancaster to talk loudly many times a day of his 'Countess-cousin.' The Reverend Grosvenor Lancaster was a fashionable cleric of Blackpool, where he was held in the highest estimation by many wealthy widows, at whose tea-parties he gladly displayed his admirable pulpit manner. He was handsome in a large and florid style, with wild tawny locks and what his parishioners called 'chiselled features.' He wore a winning smile, assisted by admirable false teeth, which he generously displayed on every reasonable occasion; and had a ringing voice that carried conviction to the pious dowagers who sat under him. His sermons blended Dean Farrar with Spurgeon in the happiest manner, and when he enlarged on the Gates of Pearl in a resonant boom, all the wealthy widows vibrated with religious emotion.

His little daughter Barbara was reared in an atmosphere of the Countess-cousin. On all convenient opportunities she was instructed artlessly to allude to that illustrious relative, and the Countess-cousin became a familiar, though never a contemned, figure in the conversation of Blackpool tea-parties. Mr. Lancaster was a widower, and, as he had no female relatives, his pet ambition was long postponed. But at last, when Barbara was sixteen, the great moment

came, and the Countess-cousin actually appeared in the flesh. Blackpool hummed with excitement, and the widows intrigued against each other for invitations to the Vicarage. Grapes and tea-cosies were showered upon Mr. Lancaster, who, for his part, showed no niggard disposition to keep the treasure to himself, but confronted the peeress daily with fresh relays of the devout.

Alas for mortal glories, so evanescent in their roseate hue! Coralie, Countess of Morland, was now but a wretched dowager. Her lord had passed away, and the title, with the estates, had gone to a nephew. Her mother-in-law, however, still lived, and found her bitter existence still further embittered by the existence of a rival Dowager-Countess, whose scented and offensive correspondence was occasionally sent by mistake to the dower house at Fullerton. Coralie had changed with the years. Fortune had smiled upon her in the way of money, so that where she had worn abundant paste, she now wore even more abundant diamonds. Her taste for pink increased as she grew stouter, and her hair became curlier and more golden as her powdered chins increased in number. Well left, she moved in the society where she was well considered, and, being ostracized by her husband's order, she became a shining star in lesser theatrical and rowdy circles, where a Countess was always a personage. Her voice waxed shriller, her pearls more gigantic, her eyebrows darker, as she settled into her position as Queen of Surbiton, where she occupied a palace filled with plush. Now and again she made a feeble effort to win back into her husband's family, but they would have none of her. As Honoria, Lady Morland, bitterly wrote to her daughter, Lady Isabella, after a chance meeting at a concert: 'I have seen poor dear Hubert's disaster again. Really, she is too dreadful for anything. All powder and pink tulle—a truly shocking sight, considering her age and her size. They tell

me she is perfectly respectable, which one wonders at; and I could wish to be kind to her for poor dear Hubert's sake, but indeed, in spite of her attempts to be lady-like when she sees me, she remains such a *woman* that I cannot summon courage to ask her into my house.'

Coralie, however, was, in the main, well contented with her lot. She had as much worship and gaiety as she wanted. So at last, won by many entreaties, she went to visit her cousin Grosvenor Lancaster at Blackpool. There she achieved fresh triumphs, and enjoyed herself as she had never expected. But Barbara Lancaster, budding into womanhood, fixed her with a predatory eye. A girl of warped views and disastrous education, she yet had ambitions that Blackpool and her father's sugary sermons could not satisfy. The Countess-cousin was rather a shock to her, but local society had thoroughly imbued her mind with the notion that a Countess is always a being of incalculable influence and unalterable popularity. Accordingly, she determined that her cousin should take her away from Blackpool, and introduce her to the exalted circles in which all peeresses habitually move. She made herself indispensable to Coralie, and her father was only too delighted when at last the Countess-cousin broached to him her plan of thenceforward taking his daughter under her wing. And so to London Barbara went with her august relation, when the visit to Blackpool drew at last to its triumphant conclusion.

In a new atmosphere Barbara Lancaster developed rapidly. She soon appeared to outgrow the lop-sided social theories that prevailed at Blackpool, and reconciled herself to the fact that even a Countess-cousin is not inevitably a favoured guest in palaces. She then adopted a signal air of bored insolence, which she guessed would most impress the gaudy-minded people who frequented her cousin's house. For some years she had remained apparently content with

the society of overdressed women and disengaged actors which surrounded her. Occasionally her extreme beauty and irritating languor exasperated Cousin Coralie, who expected everyone to be as loudly shrill in their pleasures as herself. But, on the whole, the two women got on well together, being of styles too divergent ever to clash. Various more or less impossible men had from time to time made efforts to marry her; but she rewarded them with a cool scorn, and continued her enigmatic path through life unruffled, neither seeming to enjoy nor to disapprove the heterogeneous world in which her lines were cast. Of her secret thoughts no one knew much, least of all silly, inconsequent Cousin Coralie. As far as she herself was aware, her philosophy told her little more than that her present way of life, if unsatisfactory in many ways, was, at the worst, infinitely preferable to Blackpool and the sugared flowers of her father's oratory. Nothing should induce her to return to him, however riotous and stupid she might find her cousin's set. She had lost all touch with him, and their imperfect sympathy was not mended by his incessant speculations that she would soon marry some dazzling 'aristocrat.' She had by now fully grown to realize the fact that where Lady Morland was, dazzling aristocrats were conspicuous by their absence. So she continued to trail her elaborate gowns and her bored beauty wherever her cousin led. Loud river-parties that desecrated the Cliveden woods with squallings were dear to Lady Morland's heart; first-nights she looked on as the acme of smartness, and could never be prevented from attending. And at all such dissipations was Barbara to be seen, lending a blank but lovely countenance, in which distaste was no more clearly to be discerned than enthusiasm.

No one had ever struck from her such sparks of interest as St. John Ladon. Without knowing it, he had been signally honoured by the flow of her conversation. He

lost no time in paying his promised call at the small house in Ebury Street in which Lady Morland was spending the season. He found a tiny room heavy with smoke and the fume of pastilles, where a strange, long-haired young man was singing to his own accompaniment on the banjo, while various powdered and peroxidized ladies in scarlet hats sat huddled around him drinking champagne and chewing caramels in the intervals of refilling. Lady Malham had showed him no such scenes of life. He felt startled at the unwonted spectacle, and, as he pushed into the foggy room, through whose haze the red hats glowed like so many suns through a London mist, he paused in indecision, not recognising his hostess, and fearing lest he might have come to the wrong address. But the pinkest lady, peering through the smoke, leapt to her feet with a shrill squeak, and, snatching off a large false nose, stood revealed as the Countess-cousin. With little squeals of laughter she and all the other ladies simultaneously explained that they were rehearsing for some theatricals, and that they had felt so faint with fatigue that a little 'fizz' had become necessary. Would he not join them? 'Now, do. So amusin'! And so dissipated! Just like a lot of chorus-girls, I declare.' He was overwhelmed by their pertinacity and their perfumes. And the banjo continued tinkling through the scented vapours till St. John's head began to rock. Fortunately, however, for him, he had not long been there when Barbara came lazily into the room, and, with a manner that admitted of no question, rescued him from the roseate friends of Lady Morland. She showed him the flowery room downstairs in which she usually sat embowered in roses, and allowed him to discover that in future he might ask for her directly, if he did not feel equal to coping with her cousin's acquaintances. Their intimacy advanced rapidly, and at the close of their interview she asked him to come again. He did not think it worth while to make his fare-

wells in the drawing-room, whence were now descending blasts of riotous song.

Life with Lady Morland had cured Barbara of ambitions. Therefore she did not trouble her head one way or another as to St. John Ladon's prospects or intentions. She merely looked upon him as a very pleasant friend, whose frequent visits gave a new zest to life, and made bright oases in what she had lately come to consider the Sahara of her cousin's existence. In other words, she fell definitely and irretrievably in love with the first presentable man with whom life had ever brought her into contact, who was also, by a rare stroke of fortune, perhaps the only presentable man who might ever be expected to brave the terrors of her surroundings. For all her great beauty, neither her position nor her connections held out any inducements to a man to marry her; and, had she realized fully, she might have thanked her fate that thus had sent her along a gentleman whose extreme inexperience might give him courage to contemplate an alliance with Coralie, Countess of Morland, and the popular parson of Blackpool.

But Barbara Lancaster was, in her way, as innocent of social perspective as St. John Ladon himself. Long contact with Cousin Coralie had, by shutting the more desirable portals of life, deprived her definitely of any standard for comparison; she knew the set in which she lived, but had no glimmering instinct as to social values and grades in the world beyond. St. John Ladon was to her merely the man she loved. She never stopped to consider who or what he was, never had the faintest notion of the very rich prize that her beauty had captured. Blackpool tradition maintained that only titles were divine, and Barbara retained so much of her youthful training as to have no notion that dignities and power could attach to a mere untitled squire. She knew that a peer was a peer, and a commoner was a commoner; therefore, between St. John Ladon, heir to

sixty thousand acres, and the latest thing in bureaucratic barons, a great gulf fixed must yawn for evermore, and there was no use in dwelling further on the matter. Out of innocence and ignorance the purest disinterestedness was born in the heart of Barbara Lancaster. Lady Malham, who divined what was going forward in helpless disapproval, looked at Barbara's manners, dress, and self-possession; then, giving their owner credit for the full knowledge they seemed to betoken, and seeing matters, herself, in the light of her own prior knowledge, put down Barbara as a mercenary, designing minx, set on a marriage beyond the wildest reaches of any ambition that she could reasonably have entertained. And yet, in fact, the girl, with her elaborate adventuress air, was as purely innocent of design as the merest miss in her teens. Not to mention the Black-pool tradition that lurked in her consciousness, she had further imbibed from Lady Morland's world the idea that no one was considerable who was not powerful behind the scenes of theatres. And therefore St. John must doubly have failed to tickle her aspirations, had she not loved him. Neither a peer nor an actor-manager, he was obviously a person quite outside all social consideration. Such was the clear opinion of Cousin Coralie and her friends, which they did not hesitate to pour into Barbara's acquiescent ears as matters progressed towards a climax.

As for St. John Ladon, his attitude was merely normal. He adored every sight or sound of Barbara, and though he shrank from Cousin Coralie, he utterly refused to admit that her existence was any bar to his happiness. In unavailing agony did Lady Malham watch from afar. Her brother's fear was being fulfilled with terrible rapidity. Lady Malham stood aghast at the monstrous malignity of fate. Despite her denial, she had nourished a secret hope that St. John and Enid might find themselves reciprocally attracted. And now, here was St. John captured by a most

undesirable young woman before he had been in London a month, and Enid left forlorn. On this head Lady Malham, if she had not been so excited, might have consoled herself. Lady Enid had indeed, at first, conceived it possible that she might marry her cousin; but, finding him merely pleasant, and not succeeding in falling in love with him, she had very sensibly decided to go her own way without casting another thought in his direction. But Lady Malham, absorbed in the foreknowledge of her brother's wrath, was in no mood for calm reflection. Not for years had she been so worried. Yet, in all her perturbation, she did not so far lose her head as to interfere. She knew her world too well. It was barely possible that, if ignored, the peril might pass away; interference, she knew, would immediately turn it into certain disaster. Day succeeded day in thunderous heaviness of expectation.

Meanwhile Lady Malham had an ally where she least expected it, though, had the motives of alliance been made clear to her, she would have declined the perilous help with convulsive indignation. Cousin Coralie threw all the weight of herself and her friends against this threatened marriage. To her and her circle it seemed intolerable that so beautiful and 'stylish' a girl as Barbara, accustomed to the smartest and brightest society in London, should, for all her beauty, marry just a mere beggarly mister without any theatrical connections, or anything desirable, in fact, but a dull shanty somewhere away in the country. It was true that he had a Dowager-Marchioness for his aunt; but what in the world was the use of a Dowager-Marchioness who would never consent to be friendly with any of the bride's relations? No; far better wait, and hope for a finer chance later on. A peer should not be unattainable with luck, or, at the next best, a rising actor who would be an acquisition to the set. If Lady Malham could have understood the light in which the Ladons of Ottemer were regarded and discussed in

Ebury Street, it would have cured her for ever of all suspicions as to the disinterestedness of Barbara and her friends, though, incidentally, it might have shortened her own life in a quinsy of rage. So untranslatable are social distinctions, so valueless are our claims outside our own small parish, and so insecure our public estimation, unless we bear our value clearly ticketed upon us by a title for all sorts and conditions of people to mark and respect. However, this salutary reflection was not borne in upon Lady Malham's mind, any more than its converse occurred to Lady Morland's—namely, that, though *we* do not appreciate nor prize a given position, there may be large and influential parts of the world where it is regarded as a possession more illustrious than rubies.

And now, though poor Aunt Melusina retained sense enough to keep silence, her hopes were frustrated by Cousin Coralie's aid. For the shrill squealings of protest that filled the house in Ebury Street spurred the languid-seeming Barbara to an ecstasy of irritation. Nothing any more should stop her. She did not care that St. John was no one in particular; she did not care that his position was inconsiderable, and that she herself would be marrying beneath her proper claims; she did not care whether or no he had anything desirable to offer her. But marry him she could and would on the slightest provocation, regardless of everything she might lose thereby. He should see that she was not a fortune-hunter nor an adventuress. Inflamed by pure zeal, she received him in the afternoon, her blue eyes blazing, her pale face tinged with colour, and her head lifted high. St. John had never seen even Barbara look so beautiful. Her hands nervously clasped and unclasped as she sat gazing at him intently. He had resolved to put his question, and he knew its answer without asking.

That night Lady Malham, having heard his news, sent off three telegrams, throwing over a dinner, a concert, and

an important dance. Instead of fulfilling her engagements, she dined off arrowroot and went early to bed. The next morning, calm in the knowledge of the worst, she came downstairs, to find her guilty nephew fled from the house and Lady Enid in sole occupation. Lady Enid was philosophical.

'Well,' she said, 'there's no earthly use fussing, is there? We shall have to put up with this girl now, evidently, and we may as well make the best of it. After all, she must know that she is making an amazing match, and she will probably want to play up to her new position as best she can.'

'Know it? Of course she knows it. She has been thinking of nothing else ever since that disastrous evening when we met her at the theatre.'

'Yes, but don't you see my point, mother? She knows what a tremendous prize she has carried off, and she won't want to seem unworthy of it. So she will try to behave decently according to the canons of her set, if they have any, that is . . . and we shan't have much difficulty about moulding her into proper order if she starts with good intentions.'

'Good intentions, my dear Enid! What put that into your head? You really must try not to be so sentimental. The girl's only intentions are to get all she can for herself and to have a good time. Great heavens! before the year is out we shall have Coralie Morland and her friends staying at Ottemer, and leaving their powder-puffs and champagne bottles about all over the place.'

'Is that what they do? Well, it depends on Uncle Tempest, doesn't it? I don't imagine he will let his house be made a bear-garden, or fall in love with Coralie Morland.'

'Enid! What awful ideas you have to-day! And how, *how* shall I ever tell poor Tempest? I must write to-day, I suppose, and explain.'

'I certainly should. And I wouldn't wail too loud, my dear, if I were you. We may as well give the wretched girl some run for her money. And it would be bad luck on all concerned to turn Uncle Tempest against her more than is necessary at the very start. I think we can trust him to make things fairly hot for the poor creature, without our sickening him on.'

Lady Enid's remarks were a recollection of one among her tame men—an ardent sportsman whom she had rather discarded during the supremacy of the dramatist.

Lady Malham sat down at her writing-table.

'There is something in what you say,' she answered, 'though where you pick up your language I have no notion. Upon my word, when I think of that mercenary, scheming minx, and the way she has got round poor St. John, I declare I feel quite consoled to remember how uncomfortable Tempest will make it for the woman who comes between him and his son.'

'Don't be vengeful, my dear mother. It's not your style. Settle down and compose your letter elegantly. Don't forget to tell him how beautiful his new daughter is. . . . Oh—and, mother, don't forget to tell him that, though he may have lost a son, he has found a daughter. That will fetch him.'

Laughing at her mother's outraged expression of pathetic stateliness, Lady Enid wandered from the room, leaving Lady Malham to rack her brains at the writing-table.

Tempest Ladon came down to breakfast the next morning racked with heavy pains. On the table he found Lady Lisa watching his letters. Having dislodged the cat, he took them up. The first he opened was in his sister's writing, and read as follows :

'DEAR TEMPEST,

'Bad news is best told quickly. I do not see what else I could have done, and I do not think I have been

guilty of negligidence in any way. But you were justified in your dread. I did not think that you would be so soon, but then I did not make allowances for the effrontery of modern girls. (This was erased, but not illegibly.) I am afraid I am bad at expressing myself this morning but really I am so much put out that I hardly know what I am wrighting. The long and the short of it is that St. John is engaged to a Miss Barbara Lancaster a hansom girl who is a cousin of Lady Morland's. I am sorry that she has no fortune, and no connections to speak of, and altogether I am afraid that St. John might have done better. However, she is perfectly respectable, and I suppose he might have done worse. We must make the best of it, and you must set selfish predjudices aside and try to be fond of her for your son's sake. I am sorry to preach like this, but really, Tempest, there is nothing else you can possibly do. It had to come some day you know. Oh Tempest do be as little vexed as you can. It is a miserable affair for you I know. But anyhow whatever you may think about it remember that the one person really concerned is your son. After all he must be allowed to know his own business and we must hope that time will show that he *has* and that everything may turn out for the best weather we think it likely or not. I do not pretend to know. He has as good a chance of being right as I—not that I intend to look on matters in anything but a cheerful light, as Enid advises. Tempest, be sure you do the same. Forgive me for mandering like this.

'Your affectionate sister,

'MELUSINA MALHAM.'

As he read this desperate and tautological composition, Tempest Ladon clutched at his aching head. He was suddenly blinded with abominable pangs, racked with illness and violent nausea. Melusina's correspondence was usually

so sedate and well disposed. This reckless torrent of ill-spelt verbiage did not seem to be her own work in the least. What was this sentence that kept on recurring as a sort of doleful refrain, 'For your son's sake, for your son's sake'? What was to be done for his son's sake? A thousand little hammers seemed to be pounding at one spot inside his skull, as he wrestled through pain with the convoluted obscurities of poor Lady Malham's letter. Then an earlier sentence struck his attention, and he re-read it. The truth leapt at him at last like an enemy's dagger. His son was his son no longer, but only some woman's lover. A moment of blind, dumb, animal fury seized him as he sat motionless, clutching the paper. This was the result of letting his son go free. This was Melusina's work.

Unluckily, the violence of our passions is not measured by their justice. The thought of his son's marriage burned in Tempest Ladon's mind like a devouring fire. And on that one point the little hammers beat rhythmically with the bursts of flame. To all appearance he sat calm enough, poring over Melusina's letter, and trying to gather its full gist. She, unfortunately, in the hour of her anxiety, had been utterly forsaken by her usual tact. Every word, as soon as he understood it, conveyed some fresh sting, presented some new aspect of annoyance. Her feeble entreaties that he should be reasonable only added fuel to the fire of his passion. When was mortal ever reduced to calm by representations that common-sense demands such a course? Little does an angry man consider whether his anger be reasonable or no. Did anyone ever stop to do so, no one would ever be angry in the world again.

But Mr. Ladon was beyond reach of reflection. Sick and agonized, in a dim convulsion of pain, he went at last to his bed, and, admitting the fact of his illness, summoned the local doctor. Not even a broken heart could account for the torments which he was suffering by now. He was very ill.

CHAPTER VI

ON receiving the news of his father's attack, St. John Ladon resigned himself to the notion of quitting Barbara immediately and returning to Ottemer. The prospect was altogether displeasing to him, and this illness appeared only as an irritating interruption to his enjoyment. In the naïveté of his new selfishness, he was unable to gauge by his annoyance the distance which his love for Barbara had already put between the hitherto inseparable father and son. Not being a person of introspection, therefore, he did not trouble himself as to the ethics of his mood, but gloomily prepared for his long journey down to the sick man at Ottemer.

So much beautiful and unquestioning self-denial, however, was mercifully not demanded of him, for, when he was on the eve of starting, a peremptory telegram arrived from his father, commanding him on no account to stir from where he was. Tempest Ladon would prefer to remain alone. The son, putting down his travelling wraps, felt a pleasant glow of goodness, as of one who had decided to do a tiresome but virtuous action, and has, after all, been providentially spared the sacrifice at the last moment, like Abraham. He was indeed glad that his natural idea had been to go to his father, and even more delighted with the obvious excellence of that self-sacrificing idea, when he found that it was not to be translated into fact. He put down the novels he had bought to take with him, and drove away to Barbara in the hansom that had been chartered to convey him to St. Pancras.

Tempest Ladon had made quick recovery from his attack of pain, and it was not long before he returned to consciousness and mental activity. His first notion was at all costs to prevent any of his friends from coming to him. He still had some wrath and jealousy to wrestle with and throw, and he thought it better, more dignified and decent, to achieve the pacification of his temper without admitting anyone to watch the humiliating spectacle of his weakness. He would not show himself until he was perfectly calm again, presenting no sign of the storm that was still hot within him. As he wrote out the telegram to be sent to his son, he wondered whether St. John would be glad or sorry to be spared the necessity of leaving London. On the whole, he could not believe that the woman had already made so much difference in St. John's life as to have so far succeeded in detaching him from all older ties. Yet, though he felt certain that St. John would have come unasked, had not his coming been forbidden, the father had a certain vague knowledge that it was wiser and more generous not to put even so slight a strain on his affection.

As his hands absently stroked the purring kitten on his knee, Tempest Ladon faced the future with decision. His head was no longer so painful, and his brain, in the reaction from storm, felt clear and calm. If few people are able to mock the futility of their passion while actually in its grip, almost all people have the useless power of laughing over it detachedly when the stress is past. Tempest Ladon looked back on his misery and shock with bitter amusement, and resolutely declined to recognise the possibility of their recurrence. After all, what more natural than that his son should marry? He himself had always anticipated the event. And what difference did it make whether St. John married sooner or later? For an old brainsick man to expect always to have the sole and undisturbed monopoly of a young and handsome one was ridiculous, overstrained,

sentimental, in every way exaggerated and un-English. Tempest Ladon stiffened himself in his chair at the notion of being sentimental and un-English. He and his son would, of course, remain perfectly good friends. That hope admitted of no question, but they could never again expect to live on the same footing of absolute intimacy and absorption in each other. The inevitable pathos of that 'never again' forced Tempest Ladon to make himself even more rigidly reasonable than before. Most certainly he would not allow himself to be romantic and high-falutin' over his son. Father, husband, and wife should easily be able to live together at Ottemer in quiet amity, without any silliness of jealousy or suffering. As for the girl, she was confessedly pretty and respectable, which was so much to the good, and Tempest Ladon never conceived the possibility that she might not love his son. St. John's charm was enough to secure any woman from the charge of falling in love with his prospects only. The girl should have every chance. St. John would not have chosen her unless he had loved her; and, if he loved her, that was enough to guarantee the felicity of all concerned. She should not find a peevish and intolerant father-in-law when she came to take up her life at Ottemer. He would welcome her as warmly as she deserved, being the source of St. John's happiness, and would turn the intimacy of two into a no less equal intimacy of three by admitting Barbara freely to his confidence and affection. There was no need to anticipate the slightest difficulty, the slightest soreness or rivalry. Only overfatigue and liver could possibly have betrayed him into the idiotic and hysterical sufferings of the other day.

Drilling himself sedulously into an artificial happiness, Tempest Ladon at last convinced himself so firmly of his own permanent indestructible reasonableness that he sat down to express the same on paper for the benefit of those concerned. He had no inkling that, though deliberately-

fostered feelings may be very excellent, yet it is perilous to expound them on paper; for good resolutions, alas! are swamped ere long by the waves of passion, and are barriers to passion as ineffectual as children's sand-castles to the invading waves. And it is not wise to preserve documentary evidence of a sweet reasonableness which the first storm or rub of pain will annihilate. Unfulfillable expectations are bad things to arouse, for they exact a double penalty from the disappointed; who, had they expected nothing, could have never felt the anger that goes with disillusionment. Tempest Ladon forgot that his jealousy was founded on the habits and emotions of a lifetime, while his new toleration was founded only on the sand of an elaborate resolution.

St. John, Barbara, and Aunt Melusina had all awaited the development of opinion at Ottemer with more or less disguised alarm. Therefore Tempest's letters, breathing calm sense and acceptance of the situation, came upon everyone with a pleasant shock that threw them slightly off their balance. All three took Tempest Ladon's words at their face-value, and instead of seeing in them the desperate struggles of a jealous nature after a conciliating equanimity, they augured cheerfully from them as to his permanent disposition towards the marriage and the bride. Speechless surprise at the old man's placability held St. John and Lady Malham stricken with delight; Barbara, who from dark hints and suggestions had made for herself a terrifying picture of her grim father-in-law, was inexpressibly relieved by the sane and genial tone of the epistle that so gracefully welcomed her to the position of his son's wife, and expressed the finest confidence that he and she would cooperate happily in securing St. John Ladon's happiness.

Barbara, when first the engagement had been announced, had suffered somewhat in silence through fear of the light in which St. John's relations might regard her. Whatever his own position might be, she had to face the fact that,

though Lady Malham might have a duller set than Cousin Coralie, yet it was incomparably more exalted; and her wish to conciliate that set's good opinion was soon heightened by the discovery that it was more congenial to her own taste, with all its placidity, than the wine-bibbing rowdiness of Cousin Coralie and her satellites. At first she was diffident, and, in her silent stately way, even nervous in Lady Malham's company; but when she realized that her companion's attitude was changing from irritated criticism to amicable acquiescence, she blossomed into confidence, and soon was surprised to find how much more native she found herself to Lady Malham's atmosphere than to the patchouli-scented air of Cousin Coralie. Her position, too, was made easier by Lady Enid's unexpected help.

Lady Enid was possessed by a great cult for the well-bred in life, and a great dislike of the ineffectual, the second-rate, and the emotional. Hers was essentially a clear-cut personality, a little hard and chilly in the perfection of its assurance. To do kindnesses occurred to her as rarely as to be deliberately malicious. To all, however, that failed to satisfy her standards of behaviour she was pitiless; and, on the other hand, when her exactions were conciliated, she was genial and approachable. Barbara recognised with fear that Lady Enid was of a style to which she herself aspired, and of which she seemed but a feeble and offensive parody.

It was true that the two girls had dangerous points of resemblance and difference. But Lady Enid was strongly appealed to by the beauty of Barbara. She had nothing like it. Her clear pale features had only the attraction of breeding, while Barbara, despite all probability, not only had that herself, but a strange vertiginous loveliness as well. Lady Enid was led captive by the sleepy splendour that Barbara put into her manner. Even if a little overdone, Lady Enid considered that it showed artistic sense, and was in harmony with the possessor's triumphantly

effective radiance. Barbara had proved to Lady Enid that she was worth friendship by the wise instinct that had made her so different from the uneasy chattering harpies among whom she had lived for so long. Altogether, with Lady Malham for a sponsor, Lady Enid for a friend, St. John Ladon for a lover, Barbara might feel herself blessed indeed with a smooth road to matrimony. And when to all these felicities was added the consciousness that even her austere and grim old father-in-law had capitulated to the report of her charms, and ardently desired to welcome her to his home, there seemed nothing left for her wildest hopes to aim at. She had been led dimly to fear opposition, anger, suspicion, jealousy from old Mr. Ladon; the assurance of his contentment in the marriage, therefore, set the keystone in the arch of her contentment.

Of course, the marriage must be soon; and of course, St. John's father must attend it. Barbara wrote gratefully to him in answer to his letters, and duly told him of his son's plans, of the near approach of the wedding, of the eagerness with which his own appearance was expected. She was hurt and rather alarmed on receiving by return of post a brief and cold reply from her prospective father-in-law, regretting that his health would not possibly permit him to come to London, but that he insisted on everyone's plans being carried through unaltered, being quite confident that his son was fully capable of getting himself married without the unnecessary adjunct of an old ailing father's presence. Chilled and wounded, Barbara showed this to St. John, who reassured her to the best of his power by saying that the letter meant no more, after all, than was strictly reasonable. His father *was* elderly and failing, Ottemer a long way from London, and Mr. Ladon's presence not by any means indispensable to the ceremony which settled arrangements now made it almost impossible to put off. Fear still lurked deep down in Barbara's heart.

'Are you quite, quite sure,' she said doubtfully, 'that I shall be a success at your home? St. John, I cannot bear to think that I may make your father unhappy. You must never let me come between you and him. He is so devoted to you, Aunt Melusina says.'

But St. John Ladon was in love with his wife of the future, not with his father of the past. He answered her with authority.

'You will have to take your proper place, darling. As my wife you must come first always and everywhere. The Bible says so, and even my father will not be able to stand against that.'

Barbara smiled.

'Yes,' she said, 'I like—oh, I do dearly like to think I shall always come first with you. I suppose it is natural that I should. But, St. John, I cannot help feeling sorry and hurt for your father. He is so lonely, and you have been everything in the world to him for so long. It does seem hard that a commonplace sort of girl with a pretty face should step in front of him now into your heart after all these years. I should not have been surprised if he had hated me, St. John. But I hope he won't.'

'Of course he won't,' replied St. John, trading on the affection of the old with all the engaging selfishness of the young. 'It will be enough for him that I love you. All he wants is that I should be happy. And if he is sure that you will see to that, why, of course he will love you, too.'

Barbara's fear flickered to life again.

'Oh, St. John,' she said, 'I am sure that my coming will make a difference—I am sure it will. He will want all of you, and I shall want all of you, and so between us you will get pulled to pieces like the judgment of Solomon, and everybody will be miserable all round.'

'Yes, but don't you see what nonsense you are talking, you red-headed raven! Henceforward all of me belongs to

you, and to you alone ; and, if you do me the honour to want it, nobody will ever be able to say you nay or dispute the glorious possession. As for my father, you have seen for yourself how happy and reasonable he is about the marriage, and now you are worrying your dear heart into no end of a fume simply because he can't come to it, which I could have told you long ago myself.'

'And you don't think it means that he is beginning to hate me, St. John?'

'Of course not. Is it likely? He will be only too pleased to have a woman in the house again. Letters depend entirely on the reader. You have made up your mind to be frightened by him, and so you read all manner of dreadful things between the lines. Nobody would be more astonished than my father to hear what you had made of his ordinary style of correspondence.'

'But, St. John, supposing, only supposing—after all, every horrid thing is possible in this world—supposing your father *does* hate me after all?'

'Supposing he runs after you with a carving-knife, my Barbara, depend upon it I will stand between you!'

'No, but do be serious. Will you, honestly, like me as much when you get me to your home, and then find out that your father cannot bear the sight of me?'

'You darling child! don't you know I shall? If you want me to be serious, well, I will. Whatever my father may or may not think of you, I shall always stand by you, because to me you are just perfection. If—if he doesn't like you, he will simply have to lump you. I am not going to wait till my opinion is corroborated by all the elderly gentlemen in Yorkshire before I begin to love my wife. Can't you understand that the moment a man is really in love all the previous days of his life pass away like smoke, and all the people that belonged to them turn into ghosts? I began a new life when you promised to marry me, and

there is no room in it for anyone but you. I can scarcely remember the old days now, or anyone or anything that belonged to them. So that my father may take what he can get, but you are the person I belong to, and the only person to whom I owe anything, and the only person who is really alive in the world as far as I am concerned. . . . There, are you satisfied? Whoever is happy or unhappy at Ottemer, you at least will never be unhappy for a day if I can prevent it—either by defending you against my father's carving-knife, or in any other way whatever. The idea that I could ever take his part against you! Why, I should take your side, whatever it was, just because it was yours.'

'If that's true, St. John, oh, I am so cruelly sorry for him! How hard it all sounds! But I suppose you are right. We belong to the present, and not to the past—to ourselves, and not to anyone else. But tell me how best to make your father fond of me, St. John. I want to be very, very sure that I shall never seem to stand between you two; and, even if you do love me best, I want to prevent him from ever, ever thinking so. I must be very gentle with him, and then, perhaps, he will forget to notice that you are married at all. I think it will be difficult, but it ought to be possible, St. John.'

'If my father cares a bit for me, he will make it possible, Barbara. Really, it is more for him to be careful than for you, though, of course, it is angelic of you to think about him so much. But it's his interest and his business to make friends with the dear woman that I love.'

'Yes, you do love her, don't you? . . . But I wonder why? Can you tell me?'

'Because "the higher you go, the fewer," my dear. There is no answer in the world to questions like that. One just does it; one has to, one never knows why. Very often one does not want to in the least.'

'Didn't you want to, St. John?'

'I dare say not. One never wants to fall into slavery just at first. But whether one wants to or not, it has to be, and there is no arguing or explaining it.'

Barbara was convinced, soothed, appeased. The conversation moved thenceforward on private and complimentary lines, only to be interrupted at last, after an hour that seemed five minutes, by the entrance of Lady Enid, laden with parcels.

The appointed wedding-day was drawing near. The actual details were matter of conflict between Cousin Coralie and Aunt Melusina. Cousin Coralie wanted much display, many bridesmaids, brilliant hats, and a cohort of gorgeous guests. Lady Enid and her mother for their part would also have liked a decent public wedding, if that would not inevitably have necessitated the appearance of Cousin Coralie and all her multi-coloured crowd. St. John and Barbara were only anxious to be married, and did not greatly concern themselves with the course of proceedings. Tempest Ladon made no sign whatever, and even omitted to send his son's bride any present. The omission was not, however, marked by any of those it concerned, owing to the alarms and excursions that diversified the warfare between Lady Morland on the one hand, anxious to be seen in her most scarlet frock, and Lady Malham on the other, firmly determined that matters should be so accomplished as to obviate the chance of Lady Morland's prominence in the public eye. Nobody, then, gave much thought to the absent old man, who was now awaiting news of the marriage in a grim and gloomy mood, very different from the reasonable geniality which had dictated his letters. Each successive day seemed to drop upon his brain like lead, and his many pains grew in ferocity, hour by hour. With head jerked back, he strode uncertainly up and down his room, unconsciously stumbling at intervals, as he sent his mind far afield to watch with a sombre rage the accomplishment of

his evil destiny. In the intervals when his pangs relaxed he tried hard to seize the old hopeful mood again, but his efforts were vacillating and unsuccessful; daily his mind became more and more confirmed in morbid, jealous gloom, which gripped him with the force of a mania, and seemed to keep time with the throbbings of his head.

Cousin Coralie, meanwhile, was reduced to wailings of despair and consolatory nips of Curaçoa; for Fate had interposed at last with decision, and cast victory into the scale of Lady Malham. Almost at the last moment her sister, Blanda Gordon-Wentworth, was thrown into deepest mourning by the death of her only child from meningitis. The family grief was rather formal than acute, for the boy had always suffered from nervous affections that made his existence a peril and anxiety, rather than a hope and pleasure, even to his parents. None the less, decency demanded the assumption of black, and the reduction of wedding functions to their lowest terms. Lady Malham, who could not be expected to feel keen sorrow for poor Blanda's blessed loss, may well be pardoned if she looked upon the catastrophe as a providential interposition to prevent the appearance of Lady Morland's intolerable friends at the marriage. Cousin Coralie herself, of course, must be present, but her head-gear and cloak must be perforce of a chastened hue. The poor lady saw this for herself, though she shed many tears over the unjustifiable malice of Heaven, that thus had prevented her glorious new hat from first seeing the light of day in circumstances of fitting dignity. The Reverend Grosvenor Lancaster, too, must shed the artificial moonlight of his smile, and the theatrical sweetness of his voice, over his daughter's nuptials; and there were, besides, a few Lancaster aunts and uncles from various suburban villas who could not well be excluded from the ceremony. But on all Lady Morland's set the doors could rigidly be closed, although

they had urgently striven to buy admittance by the lavishness of their presents to the bride. Lady Malham surveyed the situation with tranquil joy, and faced the wedding-day without a pang.

St. John and Barbara, meanwhile, had settled to go to Dorsetshire, and spend their honeymoon at Lady Malham's place, before their return to Ottemer. St. John looked forward to the joys of the season, and Barbara to gleaning fuller information as to the course best to be pursued in winning her father-in-law's affection. Both were too completely absorbed in their rose-coloured future to pay attention to any sins of omission or commission on the part of their relatives, so that the obstinate silence of Tempest Ladon passed over their heads without notice.

The wedding was successfully achieved. Barbara made a lovely bride, and Cousin Coralie was sufficiently inconspicuous.

But on their return to Eaton Square, the bride and bridegroom found themselves confronted by a disconcerting difficulty: a telegram had just arrived from Tempest Ladon announcing that he was ill, and commanding St. John's instant return to Ottemer with his wife. There was no resisting. Awkward and ungracious as it might seem, St. John's only course was to make many apologies to placable Lady Malham, and to leave immediately for Yorkshire. Accordingly, St. John and Barbara started in due course on their unexpected honeymoon.

CHAPTER VII

ONCE more it was evening of a dull and chilly day. Once more Mrs. Bolpett sat at the window of the Vicarage, enthroned between Miss Baynes and Mrs. Budgell. The three workers of good works were as usual engaged in peering through the curtains at the gates of Ottemer across the road, and their various pieces of needlework lay scattered regardless on the floor. Two Siamese cats lay asleep on Mrs. Budgell's lap, and a third was coiled up in the convolutions of Mrs. Bolpett's ample skirt. The situation was much the same as that presented by most of their work-parties, but one great change and excuse for abnormal curiosity was visible outside. For the gates of Ottemer were surmounted by a high triumphal arch, wreathed and jewelled with clumps and festoons of flowers, in the midst of which was enshrined a pious wish that bride and bridegroom might be happy. In other words, this was evening of the momentous day that had seen St. John Ladon married to Barbara Lancaster.

'Such a pity it is so gray and cold,' said Mrs. Budgell plaintively. 'Poor Mrs. Ladon won't have a very pleasant first impression of her husband's country, will she?'

'Yes; and this mizzle—so disagreeable,' replied Miss Baynes; 'it has made the arch look quite draggled already. All the flowers are sad and weather-beaten. I do wish she had had a more cheerful day for her arrival. I am sure that makes such a difference to a bride.'

But Mrs. Bolpett had weightier matters for concern.

'I do not think the weather signifies much,' she answered; 'and we must remember, whatever it may be, Mrs. Ladon is coming home to her husband's house, and that ought to be enough for her for the rest of her life, especially as I do not hear that she ever had a home, to speak of, of her own. No; what I am wondering—are you sure your clock is not fast, Mrs. Budgell? Ah, thanks, thanks; then they really must be here in a minute or two. What I am really doubtful about is whether they will find their father still alive or no when they get to Ottemer.'

The two other women exclaimed in horror:

'You don't think old Mr. Ladon is really ill!' cried Mrs. Budgell.

'Oh, Mrs. Bolpett! what have you heard? People never die of rheumatism or headaches, do they?'

Mrs. Bolpett looked around her with the stolid happiness of a stupid woman who has the monopoly of interesting news.

'You may depend on me,' she answered; 'I have it all from my maid Golightly, who was up at Ottemer this very afternoon. It appears that Mr. Ladon had been suffering worse than usual from his head and arm just lately. Very likely the notion that his son was going to marry a young woman of no connection had something to do with it. Anyhow, he had been feeling worse than usual for the last several days. The footman told Golightly that he had seemed sterner than ever, hardly speaking a word to anyone except the cat you gave him, Mrs. Budgell. Ah, that was a fortunate thought of mine indeed. Golightly tells me he adores it, and will not let it out of his sight for a moment now. And the cat is just as devoted to him, they say. However—oh, have I dropped my work? Thanks, thanks—however, as I was saying, he had been suffering more than usual lately—could hardly move his arm, Mrs. Budgell, and his cold so bad that he could not speak above a whisper.'

'You don't say so, Mrs. Bolpett!' answered her hostess. 'Why, how that cold does hang about him, to be sure! His voice has been affected for I don't know how long.'

'But what has happened since?' inquired Miss Baynes anxiously. 'We heard in the village to-day that he had been taken suddenly worse, and had telegraphed for the bride and bridegroom to come at once. Hadn't they meant to go somewhere else for their honeymoon?'

'I am coming to that,' replied Mrs. Bolpett, with lethargic majesty; 'you young people are so impetuous. Well, this very morning, as he sat in his room thinking about the wedding, you may depend, and what a pity it was, he was suddenly attacked by the *most* violent pain in his head, and by the most dreadful sickness, too, Mrs. Budgell,' concluded Mrs. Bolpett, sinking her voice as becomes a matron embarking on such details of a masculine ailment.

The others gazed open-mouthed.

'Did you ever!' cried Miss Baynes. 'How terrible!'

'Yes, indeed, Miss Baynes, the footman told my Golightly that the whole house was seized with alarm. Those were his very words. So they got poor Mr. Ladon to bed—he could hardly walk, you know—and then telegraphed to London for St. John and his wife.'

'But whatever can be the matter?' exclaimed Mrs. Budgell.

'Acute rheumatic gout, I feel convinced,' replied Mrs. Bolpett, who kept a medicine-chest and a herb-garden, on the strength of which possessions she assumed an air of almost presumptuous intimacy with all the subtle woes that afflict the body. 'I have no doubt whatever that it is simply acute rheumatic gout, brought on by worrying over the marriage. No wonder! Probably aggravated, too, by this gloomy damp weather. If it does not fly to the heart, he will probably survive it. But one cannot help feeling anxious, at his age.'

'Is it dangerous to the heart?' asked Mrs. Budgell in reverent inquiry, while Miss Baynes listened eagerly with all such a woman's love of fantastic and horrible medical details. Mrs. Bolpett took upon herself the air of being immediately descended from Melampus and Egeria. Her demeanour aptly blended the divine physician with the Sibyl as she solemnly wagged her head.

'One can never tell,' she replied. 'Anything may or may not affect the heart. Every time we sigh, you know, it sends a drop of blood to the heart. And so, if one sends too much, of course it is dangerous, and the heart gets congested. One cannot help feeling anxious about poor Mr. Ladon, as I think I said before.'

Suddenly there came a noise of cheering from the group of rustics that had gathered at the gates of Ottemer, and St. John and Barbara drove rapidly through the course of Mrs. Bolpett's lecture on cardiac perils. The three women leaned eagerly forward to inspect the bride.

'How lovely!' said reverential Miss Baynes.

'Beauty is only skin-deep,' answered Mrs. Bolpett loftily. 'I consider that young woman's manner bold and forward. No daughter of mine should ever wear a hat like that.'

But this high morality fell on stony ground. Great though their veneration was for Mrs. Bolpett, neither Miss Baynes nor Mrs. Budgell could refuse admiration to the new Mrs. Ladon's plumes.

'I am sure you are right,' rejoined Mrs. Budgell, however, with a show of obsequiousness—'but I must say it seems to suit her somehow.'

'Oh, it does!' cried Cora Baynes in rapture, wondering whether her own poor single ostrich-feather, if roasted long enough before the fire, could ever be induced to make so fine a show when arranged in some such noble curve.

Mrs. Bolpett remorselessly nipped their disaffection in the bud.

‘No doubt it suits her,’ she majestically replied. ‘What are you to expect of a young woman without family? Anything theatrical is proper and suitable enough for her, though quite out of place in a Ladon of Ottemer. But poor St. John Ladon has made a most unfortunate choice on the face of it. Golightly tells me that Mrs. Ladon has no relations whatever to speak of, and that she has been reared by a cousin in the most doubtful surroundings, Mrs. Budgell. I wonder what arms they will invent for the new mistress of Ottemer? Ah, what we are coming to nowadays I am sure I cannot tell! My work—where is it? Ah, thanks, thanks. Really, you quite distract me with your chatter, Miss Baynes.’

Barbara’s heart, meanwhile, was sinking low as their carriage drove up the road to Ottemer. Everything was much finer and statelier than she had ever expected, and the first glance of her new kingdom struck a chill of fear to its queen. Yet against this the presence of her new-wedded consort would have protected her in more favourable conditions. But nothing—no reflections of happiness or comfort—could cheer the heavy air of gloom with which the place seemed to have resigned itself to a new dominion. The whole landscape wore a stolid sternness that must inevitably depress the most light-hearted. Even the little mining village from which their drive started had worn an expression of puritanic dreariness as they passed through it, and now they drove up the winding road of the park, and at every turn their backward prospect widened over the rolling moors and lumpish hills that unfolded themselves further and further in the distance beyond the broad valley. The expanse was vast and cheerless in its utter lack of amenity. Only here and there a bare farmstead among livid fields, or hiding in a small artificial-looking clump of trees, diversified the desolation with a suggestion of human life. Nothing met the eye but a reticulation of stone walls mapping out a

naked country, whose prevailing tone was an adamantine sombre ugliness, which deepened into a darker gloom as it reached the sluggish-looking hills that enclosed the horizon. The air, moreover, that greeted the exiled Londoner, though neither icy nor soaking, was chilly, ungenial, even spiteful, in its denial of warmth or welcome. There was no wind, and, as yet, no drift of rain. Barbara drove through a still greyness, faintly touched with a resentful mist of very fine moisture. Beneath the gloomy sky, in the gloomy quiet, the great trees of the park stood motionless in a dreary paralysis, and their tone of green was deadened by the twilight into a monotonous and leaden look. The deer had retired to more comfortable corners, and no birds sang in the dull calm of the evening. The whole impression was corroding and mournful beyond words. Barbara, incapable of formulating her depression in words, took her husband's hand in hers and clasped it firmly. It seemed as if only his presence stood between her and the evil, intolerant influences that were gathered together to overshadow her married life.

At last they topped the long rise of the hill that led up the park from the village and the valley below, and began to descend the gentle slope that rolled down into the cup of moorland, at whose centre lay Ottemer and its lake. If gloom had prevailed before in Barbara's heart, it was intensified to a numb despair as she surveyed what lay before her. The vast shallow goblet of the hills seemed all of one immovable and hopeless purple. On every side rose sombre ridges of the fell, and she found that she would have given anything to have commanded even the dreary valley prospect again, rather than the concentrated desolation with which she was now hemmed in. The road wound over dark moorland, dotted with wizened bushes, which all inclined in one direction, obedient to the lash of the prevailing wind. Ahead, at the bottom of the hollow, the

stunted woods of Ottemer lay, a cloudy mass in the dusk, in whose midst she could occasionally see a glimpse of leaden water and the gleam of white. The whole environment of her new home was so enormous in its silence, so crushing in the effect of its illimitable desolation, that she trembled with superstitious awe as the influences of the evening closed in upon her more and more. Over the surrounding grey fells nothing now could be seen but grey sky. There was no suggestion of any other world anywhere. The wavy line of moorland above her seemed the rim of the earth—seemed to make the depression where Ottemer lay, the centre of a new and separate planet, having no connection with that other sunlit planet where London lived, and people laughed, and she herself had despised the plush tablecloths of Surbiton. Not even the touch of her husband's hand could relieve the overwhelming impression of her solitude, and bride and bridegroom drove onwards in silence through the sad and unfriendly dusk. Barbara compelled her mind in self-defence to dwell less on the awfulness of her own feeling than on the terrible fate of her poor husband, forced throughout his youth to dwell amid the powers of darkness in this grim abomination of desolation, summer and winter too. Oh, if this was summer, what were autumn and winter? But the place evidently knew neither times nor seasons, being unrelated to the rest of earth. It must lie always in an unalterable gloom of twilight. And in the grip of this had St. John passed his life. And yet, somehow, he had contrived to survive, and even to present some likeness to other more favoured mortals who were privileged to dwell in the world of daylight. Barbara thrilled with pity for his fate, and with admiration for the indomitable courage he had shown. To indicate that she fully understood his feelings, she gently pressed his hand, and found her own sufferings sensibly relieved by concentrating her compassion on her husband's.

Neither had spoken since passing through the lodge-gates of Ottemer, and Barbara could feel helped by the knowledge that her husband must be sharing her thoughts. But the increasing touch of her hand on his seemed at last to loosen his lips. They had now passed from the open moorland into the shadowy dusk of the woods, when St. John spoke.

'I am glad you feel it as I do,' he said, with a sigh of relief.

'I shall always feel as you do, I hope,' she answered.

'Oh, St. John, what *can* one say in the face of all this?'

'Nothing. You were quite right not to say a word. There is nothing small people like us can say. The whole thing is too large. I knew you would keep quiet, and not try to put your feelings into notes of exclamation. But, by Jove! isn't the place glorious to-night?'

'Glorious?' said Barbara dully.

'Yes, you are quite right. "Glorious" is a hopeless word, of course, to express the magic of this huge silence. Oh, Barbara, how glad I am that you have made your first acquaintance with Ottemer in its grandest aspect! It is a thing to remember all your life. It is a favourable omen for us, too. And to fancy there are people who think this calm sort of holy mysteriousness is dull! Do you know, Barbara, I have known stupid people who thought these hills were only bleak and gloomy and barren. Can you imagine anyone being unable to see the majesty and the stately beauty of it all? It just shows you what blind fools there are in the world. What should I have done if you had been like that? But I always knew you would not be.'

An iron gate seemed to clang violently in Barbara's life, shutting her off from her husband into a horrible solitary confinement of gloom. He actually liked this place; seriously and without irony, he liked it. More, he even loved it—loved it so passionately that no real sympathy could ever be hoped for with anyone who did not love it, or

seem to love it, as passionately as he did himself. Barbara, with a shock of pure dread, saw that her conjugal happiness and his was to depend thenceforward on a huge and almost hopeless hypocrisy. It was with a feeling of sick anguish that she at last found voice to answer him. Her reply was indirect, for she could not bring herself to face the iron gate again. Such things in life may seem little to the spectator, but to the sufferer they are pains more poignant than bereavement, estrangement—all the most splendid and fulfilling complications of love and life.

‘Shall we soon be there?’ said Barbara.

‘Almost directly,’ he answered. ‘How tired your dear voice sounds! You are exhausted by the beauty of this. So am I often. But we are almost at home, and you shall have some food. By Jove! I wonder how we shall find my father. I had quite forgotten all about him.’

That word ‘home’ was as the key turning in the padlock of her iron gate. Her imprisonment seemed fixed. Yes, this place of dreary shadows was home. She could not answer him a word. Terror and oppression held her dumb and dazed. Suddenly the carriage turned the last corner, and drove by the façade of the vast long white house to its arcaded doorway. The cold gleam of the place made it appear like a workhouse or a gaol to Barbara as she alighted and passed up into the chilly sepulchral hall, where the lights had not yet been kindled, and in the high corners of whose gloomy vaulting evil shadows lurked in undetermined enmity.

Servants were aligned to receive the new mistress of the house, and the required compliments were made and accepted. Barbara made haste to interrupt their process.

‘Ask how your father is, St. John,’ she said briefly.

They heard that Mr. Ladon was better, though still in pain. He wished to see his son’s wife as soon as possible. He was sitting in his room, having declined to stay in bed,

and being unable as yet to come downstairs. The doctor had given these remedies and those; no danger was anticipated; the headache seemed inclined to relax; and Mr. Ladon attributed his attack to some sort of sudden chill. By the morrow he expected to be up and about.

St. John and Barbara passed out of the hall into the long corridor at the back that ran the whole length of the house, looking out into a great flagged rectangle that lay in the centre of the building. Here the dusk was intensified, and the place seemed full of shadows. Ranged in line along the inner wall, Lady Malham's old friends the marble Emperors and Empresses seemed new enemies to Barbara. In the gloom they wore a wicked whiteness that made them appear like spectres, and their fixed, cold eyes glared with baleful disdain on the stranger as she hurried past them on her husband's arm. Octavian, bland and shrewd; cunning, respectable-looking Livia, lowering Tiberius, Caius, bovine Claudius; then the consort-sisters of Caius, Julia, Agrippina, and Livilla; then the same Agrippina as Empress, and yet again as mother of Cæsar, always grave and rather cruel in her thin-lipped, coldly vicious beauty. Enthroned immortally in her long low chair, that blackest soul in recorded history seemed to gaze out through narrowed lids upon the new-comer with a chilly, concentrated indifference. Then, next to the Empress-mother, shone the paradoxical and exquisite purity of Messalina; then Britannicus and gloomy Octavia, and Antonia-Clytie, the beautiful sister of Tiberius. Last of all came the bull-necked bust of that ill-starred Cæsar whose cherished reputation as artist has suffered shipwreck with his fame as Emperor, blackened by a brilliant and malignant journalist who set himself to damn the living infamies of Domitian through the memory of the long-dead Nero; and side by side with the last of that great Claudian family stood the very gracious and lovely lady his wife, the Deified Holiness of Poppæa, who has left in history

the fragrance of a charm no less potent than Mary Stuart's, from which none who had ever seen her could escape, even when her beauty had long been dust and ashes—neither the husband she had coldly betrayed for an Imperial throne, nor the conqueror in later years, who turned aside from his road to lay flowers on the grave of the woman he had adored in the fallen Emperor's day.

At last the tragic line of gleaming spectators in the dusk was passed, and Barbara set herself to mount the great stairway at her husband's heels. Now, though the Cæsars were left behind, the darkness was haunted by dead Ladons of Ottemer, whose phantoms peered down from dingy canvases upon the wall. Barbara began to wonder whether lamps were ever lit in this immense catacomb of a house, or whether unalterable gloom were its perpetual condition, when at last, after further windings, her husband threw open a door and ushered her into a room so dazzling with brilliancy of light that for an instant or two she felt dazed, and closed her unaccustomed eyes to the glare. When she opened them again, there before her, with lamps on all sides of him, sat her father-in-law, whom she had so long feared to meet. A formidable figure he looked—splendid, stalwart, rugged, a lion of a man. What, then, was her surprise when from that deep chest proceeded at last only a low and gentle murmur, utterly at variance with the voice that his appearance inevitably suggested.

'St. John,' it said clearly, but very softly, 'is that your wife? Bring her nearer; I can hardly see her in this profoundly dark room. Bring her close.'

Bride and bridegroom approached.

'This is Barbara,' said St. John, with a ring of pride in his tone. Then, almost as an afterthought: 'How are you, though, father? We have been terribly anxious all the way down. You don't look amiss. A bit pale, perhaps.'

Tempest Ladon peered up at Barbara, and addressed his answer to her.

'Anxious, were you?' he said. 'I am sorry for that. I must apologize all round. The fact is, I have had a bad bilious chill, or something of the kind. Even now I can scarcely see you properly; my eyes seem darkened somehow. And my fool of a man won't light up the room properly. I ought to rise to receive you, Barbara, I know; but I must ask you to excuse me. I reel and totter about in the most ridiculous and undignified way whenever I try to stand or walk to-day.' His head sprang back with a defiant jerk, and he was silent.

'I hope you won't have made your cold worse by sitting up for us,' said Barbara, unconsciously raising her voice in some instinctive feeling that a half-dumb person must necessarily be also half deaf.

'Cold?' was the low-voiced answer. 'Oh, my voice. Yes, I have had no voice for quite a long time now. But even if I am a bundle of irritating ailments at present, deafness is not among them as yet, so you need not trouble yourself to shout at me, thank you.'

Barbara flushed. Suddenly she had made a silly mistake, and the false step seemed to have dashed her up against a watchful human enmity to match the watchful enmity that inspired the country and filled the shadowy corners of the house. She recalled her forebodings.

'I am so sorry,' she said. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

Her father-in-law had been feeling some remorse for his petulance, but her answer stung his resentment to life.

'Quite the mistress of the house already,' he answered with a smile. 'Yes, go, won't you, and get yourself accustomed to the working details of your sovereignty. If you will be kind enough to send me my valet, I shall be much obliged. Only if it does not inconvenience you, of course.'

Again Barbara flushed, but this time with anger. Such sweet-voiced brutality was unnecessary and undeserved. She forgot the pain, the jealous anxiety, the racking torments of body and mind from which her enemy had been suffering to the last edge of endurance; she only realized that, all hopes to the contrary, he stood declared her enemy.

'Thank you,' she said, 'I will try to do all I can. I am sure you will be glad to have a woman at the head of the household again. I see that I shall have my hands full. Are you coming, St. John? I will send you up your dinner, shall I, Mr. Ladon? The butler will tell me what you want.'

She laughed lightly, in a mitigating manner, to soften the odious impression of the snub she had administered, meaning to be decisive, but not too stringently severe. Then she turned with some arrogance of manner to leave the room. Her father-in-law watched her go with a straining eye and a smile of gratified dislike. This was all he had expected. Domineering, flaunting, tactless—this was precisely the handsome, underbred, usurping girl whom his worse moments had foreseen. St. John's attention was too firmly fixed on his beautiful wife to notice his father's expression. He hardly heard her words through his ecstasy over her beauty. For his part, he supposed the meeting to have been quite as satisfactory as anyone could have hoped, the ice very effectually broken, relationship well knitted between his father and his wife. The two men followed Barbara with eager eyes. Suddenly her manner changed; a violent fear came into it. She stopped, hesitated, cast her eyes about her with anxious suspicion; then, with skirts drawn tightly together, she slunk hastily out into the passage, closing the door with strenuous satisfaction. St. John only stayed long enough to hear his father say softly: 'My compliments, St. John. I am sure I congratulate you. A very handsome and confident young woman.'

Then, with the words, but not their true meaning, ringing in his ear, he hastened after his wife, leaving his disabled father alone, still wearing that ominous smile of gratified foreboding. St. John found Barbara alone in the passage, leaning against the wall, deadly pale, and clutching at her heart.

‘Darling, whatever is it?’ he cried in terror.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘my heart! I am faint. Let me go to our room—let me go!’

‘But why?’ he cried in mystery. ‘Whatever is the matter? You have not been frightened by my dear old father, have you? Why, he has fallen in love with you at first sight. He told me so himself.’

‘No, no, it’s not that, St. John: Oh, what a fool I am!’

‘Then what is it, Barbara? Here, take my arm, and tell me as we go.’

‘I felt—all of a sudden, St. John,—I felt as if there were a cat in the room. I suppose I must have been overtired by the journey. It gave me goose-flesh all over. Wasn’t it ridiculous? But I am better now. Of course, even if the cook kept a cat, it wouldn’t be in your father’s room, would it? Perhaps it might have crept in by mistake, though. I shall tell her to get rid of every cat she may have to-morrow as soon as I see her.’

‘But . . . Barbara, do you dislike cats, then?’ asked her husband in trepidation.

‘Dislike them? Ugh! the very notion of a cat makes me sick! Horrible, sly, creepy-slinks! I have never been able to bear being in the same room with one. It’s no use laughing at me, or trying to explain. There is the feeling, and there is no more to be said.’

‘But, look here, whatever are we to do?’ answered St. John doubtfully, as the full dangers of this new and strange complication forced themselves upon his notice. ‘This is very awkward indeed.’

'Oh, you'll find the servants won't mind clearing their cats out of the house. No one really likes cats.'

'But it isn't the servants, Barbara.'

'Not the servants? Then . . . are there any really? And whose are they, St. John? Oh, surely not yours, St. John?'

'They're my father's, Barbara, which is worse. And he adores them, and won't let them out of his sight if he can help it.'

'Then he'll never have me in it,' answered Barbara. 'Oh, how horrible! Whatever shall I do? Is this our room? Then leave me alone—yes, leave me alone. I want to think—I want to think. Yes, yes. . . . Go away, don't bother me. I shall be down in time for dinner, whenever that may be.'

She passed into the dark room, and closed the door sharply in her husband's face. A moment later he heard the key turn in the lock. After a moment's doubtful pause he went downstairs. The complication bade fair to become disastrous. And meanwhile Barbara was wrestling down her terrors, her depression, and her weariness in the dark.

CHAPTER VIII

BETWEEN dark and dawn the world had been made new for Barbara Ladon. She woke with a sense of tingling and hopeful vitality. Her husband was no longer with her ; no doubt she had slept late, and he had gone to attend on his father. She rang for her maid, and was eagerly impatient till she came. Then, having dressed in a passion of haste, she made her way out into the passage. The whole aspect of things had changed with the passing of night. It seemed as if the malign spirits of the evening had only waited to see her well into the house before departing to their own place and making way for more healthy presences. The rooms now shone clean and garnished. No more shadows lurked, all the marble figures were indubitable dead stone. Lazily Barbara sauntered down the big stairway and along the corridors, enjoying her triumph over nocturnal nerves, as she read the legend of each dead Ladon portrait and the inscription of every vanished Cæsar. Now for the first time, in the sparkling light, she saw the immense and solid beauty of the house over which she had come to rule. In every way its quiet stateliness surprised her. She had had no notion that to be a Ladon of Ottemer implied all this. She recalled, with a conscious smile, her own humble opinion of St. John's claims and position, and began to recognise some of the objections that Tempest Ladon or Lady Malham might have vainly made, had they chosen, to the inclusion of a Blackpool Lancaster among the many illustrious ladies whose names adorned the Ladon pedigree. She passed

along, gazing up at each painted Blanda or Melusina Ladon of the past, with all the Janes, Marys, and Elizabeths, whom long-dead Ladons of Ottemer had chosen for mothers of the family and mistresses of the house. Barbara wondered whether any toil and pains could ever make her a fit companion for the starched excellencies of these departed matrons. Her doubts were suddenly intensified on beholding a reflection of herself in a long mirror in an alcove. She had been inspired, from some idea of suitability, to put on a white frock and a green hat. The frock was an artful mass of lace insertion, tucks, and ornamental variations; the hat was of immense size, and contained a large blue bow, whose colour showed the influence of the Cousin Coralie school of taste. However, Barbara reflected joyously that if the dead Ottemer ladies had not worn such things, it was not because they would not, but because they could not. Anyhow, she was beautiful, and they, for the most part, were not. She imagined a portrait of herself by Sargent, blue bow and all, wearing an expression of tense and lovely sadness; she compared it with the mim-mouthed preciseness of the canvases before her, and rejoiced in the comparison. It should be a striking addition to the gallery, she decided, as she passed by the male and female Romneys of their time, the few Vandykes and the more than suspicious Holbeins, till she paused at last before two genuine pictures of the master, the one representing the original Melusina Ladon, who had been great-niece to Edward IV., and the other her daughter, the original Blanda Ladon, who had so well conciliated the royal favour of Henry VIII., as to acquire for her family, besides many minor glories, the entire estates of the great Cistercian abbey of the Ottermere. 'If those were beauties,' thought Barbara, 'what am I?'

Then she found her way into the big drawing-room, and inspected miniatures, snuff-boxes, china, with unsophisticated

joy. Cousin Coralie affected comic china birds on bicycles, so that Barbara, who had long despised such eccentricities, was able to feel a thrill of joy over her first acquaintance with really beautiful things, well suited in a really beautiful environment. When she had played long enough with everything that most took her fancy, she advanced to one of the long French windows. Clearly it was meant to open, clearly it had not been opened for an untold age. Outside, a gravel path ran severely along the front of the house; beyond it a lawn sloped away to the bare shore of the lake, whose further bank was masked in woodland. Barbara felt a wild, imperious desire to be out of doors. The house seemed full of keen and sweet fragrance this morning; what must it not be out in the wide air itself? She battled for some time with bolts and pullies, but at last succeeded in wrenching the window open, at the expense of a biscuit cupid, who was so much perturbed by her energy and the unaccustomed draught as to fall suddenly off the table and break. 'Stupid little thing,' said Barbara to herself, and went hastily out into the lawn, leaving him where he lay.

The world outside was no less changed than that within. Barbara could hardly believe the place to be the same. The air now danced in the sunlight, rippling up against her cheek and hair with a gleeful and impish vitality. Such breaths of wind as came were filled with a fine and inspiring virility that set her nerves vibrating. The hills that hemmed her in were no longer malevolent and sombre. Day revealed them austere but noble, clad with sweeping velvet of heather, and jewelled with kindly patches of green. Green, too, were the woods on either side of the house, and the water of the lake lay blue beneath the clear sky. Barbara felt the sunlight entering her blood and the clean strength of the atmosphere kindling her brain with pleasurable determination. She ran down to the edge of the grass,

and looked back thence at the façade of the house which towered behind her. From the lake side Ottemer presented its most stately face—a long, two-storied palace, Georgian in design, gravely ornamented, sedulously white, and defiled with no growth of shrub or creeper; from ground-floor to balustraded parapet a solid and trustworthy personality, full of a majestic and self-contained beauty, neither bashful nor presuming, but in every line of construction and decoration a well-bred, self-confident building, thoroughly of the best British spirit in its air of established discretion and scorn of all uneasy and ephemeral attractions. After the first gaze had satisfied Barbara as to its size and scheme, she was touched by a faint chill at the cold excellence and firmness with which its many frigid windows seemed to gaze impassively upon her. She decided that she was too suburban at present to be admitted by Ottemer to anything like terms of intimate friendship. To wipe away the impression of its superiority, she thought that she would seek the garden, and refresh herself with flowers. Accordingly, she wandered from face to face of the house, but all in vain. On one side lay the lake; then, beyond the intervening yards and spaces of the great square building, the drive rolled up along the landward façade. Either end of the long rectangle tailed away into offices that merged into shrubberies of laurel and other forbidding growths, so that the stark building rose four-square from the bare earth, admitting nowhere the distracting futility of gardening. Barbara felt depressed, and wandered off down the drive, hoping to come on something better.

Having passed the stables, stately and unsociable as the house in their cleanly correctness, their new mistress found the road leading her into the woods. Among the dense undergrowth ferns sprang and rioted, while above them tall Campanulas carried great bells of a soft pale blue. Then she came to a clearing. Here at last was the garden,

sternly walled in, and locked against all comers. Knockings and cries at last brought an official to the door. He was a grubby and unintelligent youth, who at first was at a loss to connect this flouncy apparition in the immense tip-tilted green hat with his master's new and lawful wife. Barbara, who had never before in her life been brought into conflict with true bucolic stupidity, was rapidly becoming provoked to fluent indignation, when fortunately the head-gardener hove into sight round the corner. By a process of exclusion he soon recognised his master's wife, and with many apologies inducted her into the garden. Here her flower-loving soul was daunted by perceiving little but vegetables and fruit. She began explaining her ambitions. The gardener, who had looked forward to the female invasion with almost as much jealous foreboding as Mr. Ladon himself, responded coldly to the wishes poured forth by poor Barbara. It had always seemed to her that the only possible compensation for living in the country lay in the possession of a beautiful garden. She had soaked herself in the lore of all the many women who nowadays write desultory gossip on horticulture, interspersed with notions on cookery and schoolroom ethics; and now that Fate had sent her to a country home, she hoped to avail herself of this heap of knowledge that she had accumulated long since in case the chance of using it should ever occur. Accordingly, she held forth eagerly to her unsympathetic companion on all the wonderful floral improvements she hoped to introduce. He, for his part, received her ejaculations coldly. Her enthusiasm struck him as exaggerated, premature, and without sound root of knowledge. Neither her manner nor her appearance in the least coincided with his notions of a fitting wife for 'Master St. John.' He walked beside her respectfully, pointing out cabbages and onions whenever her rhapsodies became most painful.

At last they came to the glass-houses, a goodly row which

occupied the further end of the garden. Barbara breathed again. Probably her father-in-law did not care for flowers. Evidently it was the lack of them that had imparted such a cheerless look even to the stately beauty of the drawing-room. But she would certainly remedy all this immediately, and the hot-houses should come to her aid. Flowers in abundance could not fail to supply the lacking air of homeliness that she had missed in the corridors and saloons of Ottemer. It was with high hopes that she entered the first lean-to. Even here utilitarian fruits predominated—peaches, grapes, and figs. But there was also, as she passed from one to another, a noble display of blossoms. Orchids in many kinds shone around her, with eucharis, tuberose, gloxinia—half a dozen other lovely things. Barbara was enraptured. Without giving any notice to the gardener she proceeded to pick everything of any beauty that was within reach, until her arms were filled with a sheaf of flowers. He, meanwhile, looked on with a glacial and apoplectic glare of protest, which, however, he was too well trained to express in words. Then they came into another house where cattleyas bloomed ardently. Barbara's eyes were sparkling.

'How lovely they are!' she exclaimed with a gasp. 'Send some of them up to the house, please. Will you send them up to-day? Why are there no flowers in the house, and all these masses here?'

'Mr. Ladon likes to 'ave flowers in the hot-houses, but he doesn't like them brought into the house, m'm,' replied the gardener with frigidity, omitting to mention that he turned a modest profit by privately disposing of these blossoms to various clients.

'Oh, but what nonsense!' said Barbara; 'he will soon like flowers now that I'm here to teach him. I will begin by having them in my rooms. Don't forget to send me up those—what do you call 'ems?—cattleyas to-day, and those

tuberoses, and a lot of gloxinias, and those pans of white wedding-bouquet-looking things,' she added, pointing out the eucharis.

The gardener groaned in spirit. This impetuous new mistress was by no means to his mind. Yet he knew St. John Ladon and his father far too well to contradict the wishes of St. John's wife.

'Very good, m'm,' he answered impassively.

'Are there no roses?' Barbara went on. 'Surely there must be roses! I never heard of a garden without roses before.'

'If you wish, m'm, I will take you to the rose-garden.'

'Wait, wait a moment,' cried Barbara, stopping to pick a dozen great mauve and gold cattleyas, while the gardener's heart stood still within him at sight of the rapine. 'I must just have a few of these first, and what are those huge—oh, Malmaison carnations—yes, get me a good bunch of them, please.'

The gardener now found himself forced actually to play executioner to his own profits. He gathered the Malmaisons with an air of leaden gloom, and laid them in Barbara's crowded arms. Then he prepared to lead on to the roses.

'No,' said Barbara, 'the roses must wait. I can't carry another straw, or the camel's back will break. Tell me what the time is, will you? Half-past ten? Good gracious! and I have had no breakfast. I must hurry home. They will think I am lost. Send up the things without losing a moment, will you? Thanks.'

She hastened away from him and departed, leaving the garden-gate open behind her, quite heedless of any rabbits that might get in. The gardener stumped slowly after her and shut it. Standing with gaze fixed despondently on the ground, he meditated over the new régime. Then he solemnly spat into the strawberry-bed. It was his farewell

tribute to the good old days. He turned and went heavily about his business.

Meanwhile Barbara was making what haste she could, but a flower dropped at every other step, and she could not resign herself to leaving any on the road. At last, however, she drew near the house, whereupon she sat down on a bank to arrange her trophies before entering. The cattleyas especially attracted her. 'Really,' she thought, 'they are exactly my colour. Nobody else could wear them. I wonder how they would look in my hair? I believe the result would be rather like a French poster; they are so very mauve, and my hair is so very tomato-coloured. I think it would look rather daring. I am certain it would be ever so effective.' She hastily untied and unpinned the green hat, and threw it on the grass at her side. Then she made up two clusters of cattleyas, and stuck one over each ear. 'And now,' she said, 'I haven't got a scrap of looking-glass, after all. I shall have to carry the hat and the flowers till I get indoors and see what these cattleyas really do look like in my hair. Mercifully, I can put the flowers into the hat, and carry them so. What a happy idea! I wonder if the servants will think me quite mad? And what a comfort St. John's old gorgon of a father won't be down for breakfast.'

She rose, gathered up the green hat by its long tulle strings, tucked the remainder of the flowers hurriedly into it, and made for the house in haste.

A desire to escape observation prompted her to get indoors again by the same window from which she had made her exit. Nobody was in the drawing-room, and she had time to inspect the orchids, and decide that the general effect, though audacious, was triumphantly effective. Then she hurried into the passage, and almost ran into the polite Barclay.

'Beg pardon, m'm,' said the butler, 'but Mr. St. John has

been inquiring for you. He could not think where you was got to, m'm. We feared you might have lost your way. Breakfast is in the morning-room, if you will come this way.'

His demeanour was of the most correct, but poor Surbitonized Barbara felt that she had never before realized the malign powers possessed by the politeness of a well-bred servant. She seemed to read contempt of her insanity into every syllable he spoke. All her boldness oozed away, and she crimsoned with consciousness of the absurd appearance she must certainly be making in her absurd flowers. At last he threw wide a mahogany door.

'Here is Mrs. Ladon, sir,' he announced in an explanatory voice.

Barbara entered a large, strange room, with a round table, where silver flickered in a dazzling sunlight, which, after the discreet light of the corridors, prevented her from seeing clearly. Then her sight returned, and she saw. There at the breakfast-table sat her husband, laughing at the figure she made, and, by some malign twist of doom, there also sat her redoubtable father-in-law. Yes, it was undoubtedly he. He had evidently arisen from his sick-bed and descended to breakfast, only to fulfil the disasters of his daughter. Barbara, annoyed beyond expression at this ill-luck, swung her flower-laden hat by its strings with some ostentation. A stalk of tuberose flew out, followed by a bunch of stephanotis. She took no notice, but made her salutations with a certain haughtiness, then took her place. However, her father-in-law was speaking.

'St. John,' he was saying, 'do you think it would annoy your wife if I asked her not to bring strongly-scented flowers into any rooms but her own? They make my head ache most unfortunately. Indeed, we are not fond of flowers of any kind in the house, are we, St. John? It has never been our custom to take them out of the garden.'

But Barbara's early exaltation had worn itself down, as exaltation often does, into a distinct sensation of crossness. She felt that she had done wrong in being late, had made a fool of herself grotesquely, had put everyone out. Accordingly, she took refuge in rudeness to disguise her instinct that perhaps she had acted recklessly.

'A thousand pardons,' she answered off-handedly. 'Personally, I love flowers, so that I cannot understand everyone else's not doing so. As for St. John, he loves them too when he is with me. And now we are going to start having plenty of them in the house—at least, wherever I am to be found. You will probably discover they will do your head-aches all the good in the world, when once you have got accustomed to them.'

'You are so thoughtful,' said Mr. Ladon softly, while St. John beamed proudly at the compliment paid to his wife; 'and you bring sunshine into the room with you as well as evil-smelling flowers, dear Barbara. Is that a hat? I cannot make it out in this dark room. St. John, why is the room so dark? There are shadows everywhere.'

'Barbara likes to dress prettily, father,' added St. John.

'Yes, indeed, Barbara does certainly dress brightly. And is it usual in London to wear an evening gown for breakfast?'

'I put it on in your honour,' answered Barbara, smiling. She had poured herself out some tea, St. John had given her some omelette, and her temper was restored—no less by food and reflection than by her father-in-law's obvious irritation. Her innocent reply increased his wrath as much as a soft answer invariably does. He peered with redoubled distaste at the white neck that rose from Barbara's low-cut silk shirt.

'I hope I shall not inconvenience your wife, St. John,' he said, 'if I ask her in future not to miss family prayers before breakfast.'

St. John's jaw dropped. Barbara stopped eating.

'Prayers!' she said. 'What prayers—where?'

Barbara regarded all people who go to church except for display of respectability as incomprehensible fools, and even the pilgrims of respectability she looked upon as rather despicable curs of convention. 'Family prayers' was to her a remote and almost meaningless name, dimly recalling the antediluvian days of Blackpool, but having no possible reference whatever to ordinary civilized life as led by sane and comfortable-minded people.

Her father-in-law's head went back with an angry spasm. 'I have no notion to what you may have been accustomed, Barbara,' he softly purred, 'but I must tell you that you have married into a family of devout Christians, who endeavour to lead a serious and holy life.'

'Oh, Barbara will be delighted. I forgot to tell her,' said St. John. 'It was all my fault. You cannot expect her to know the ways of the house yet awhile.'

Barbara sat aghast. Her husband would not have thus betrayed her had the case not been urgent. She could not conceive what the fuss was about, but a moment's good-natured and reckless consideration enabled her to decide that she would gladly attend a dozen family devotions to keep the peace. She said as much cheerfully.

'I am sure,' replied Tempest Ladon gently, 'that you would prefer to be acting Ophelia, as you have surely been doing this morning with those—are they flowers in your hair? But you will get accustomed to our ways quite soon. We will break you into them as you are going to break me into smelly blossoms.'

Barbara, who, in a spasm of belated piety, had been trying surreptitiously to remove the forgotten cattleyas, thinking them perhaps unsuitable to the mention of prayers, blushed angrily to find that she had only succeeded in drawing attention to their presence.

'I am sorry,' she began.

'Pray, pray do not apologize. We think you delightful,' said the remorseless old man. 'And doubtless you will settle down in time. St. John, will you ring for Lisa and her breakfast?'

St. John gave one agonized glance at Barbara, as if entreating an effort of self-control, then he rose and touched the bell. It was immediately answered. Barbara, who sat crisping herself resolutely into strenuous endurance, saw the door open and Lady Lisa walk quickly into the room. Barbara shuddered with repulsion, but kept her seat, though with pallid face and lips. The cat was duly given her breakfast in a corner, then began wandering about the room. With a vehement effort Barbara restrained herself as she sat watching Lady Lisa. She found that she could bear the spectacle if only the creature came no nearer. St. John looked at her across the table with adoring admiration, then Lady Lisa roamed out of sight. Tempest Ladon lifted his head and looked at Barbara.

'Love me, love my cat,' he said. 'We all love cats in this house, especially St. John and I. Lady Lisa is quite a person. I hope she will make friends with you. You like cats, of course? All women do.'

Barbara could scarcely answer. She was suffering agonies of apprehension. The whole scene was a martyrdom to her. And she foresaw that this or worse would have to be endured many times a day every day henceforth for ever. It was far worse than family prayers, than any other infliction of her married life. Tempest Ladon was watching her intently.

'Do not speak,' he said softly at last. 'It is always best not to speak. Ah, I thought so.'

At the same instant Barbara felt a soft body leap lightly to her shoulder. A second later a wise little sealskin-coloured face with round blue eyes was thrust into her

own. White whiskers tickled her cheek. With a hysterical cry of revolt she tore the animal roughly away and ran out of the room. Heavy silence followed her departure. Tempest Ladon was almost sick with rage, as she had been with disgust. Lady Lisa, exceedingly annoyed and surprised at finding her friendly overtures thus rudely rejected, made his anger deeper by refusing all efforts at consolation. She withdrew firmly to the fireplace, where she established herself in state in a rigid Egyptian attitude which no persuasion could induce her to relax. Her thin dark tail was folded over her dark feet, and her eyes gazed imperturbably into illimitable space.

St. John, disappointed by this initial fiasco, hardly knew what to say. He had built so much on the warm friendship that was so certainly to reign between his father and his wife. But now he could not deny to himself that things were beginning in the most untoward manner. It was an accursed piece of luck that Barbara should have this morbid horror of cats. He had heard of such cases, but, never having come across one, had thought them so rare as to be almost mythical. And now here was one cropping up in the one place in the world where its occurrence was most fatal and disastrous. He tried apologies.

‘I am so sorry, father,’ he said; ‘but Barbara told me last night she has a horror of cats. I never knew it before, or—well, we must hope she will get over it.’

His father was too angry even to be suave.

‘Horror? Rubbish! Such things don’t exist. She was only startled, and if she pretends to feel any horror, it is only the idiotic affectation of an underbred, idle woman.’

‘Look here, father, I know you are ill and upset and all that, but——’

‘Going to quarrel with your father, are you, before you have been married for twenty-four hours? Ah, I knew what influence a wife would have on you. I foretold it.’

'If you could have foretold that your temper could not keep quiet for a single day, Barbara and I might have made different arrangements.'

'Yes, and this is what we are come to simply because I object to seeing my friends beaten and thrown about like dolls by a silly girl.'

'I don't see what more I can say. You know I am exceedingly sorry this has happened. I will speak to Barbara about it. But you must take my word for it that the whole thing was no fault of hers. She simply could not help it. She was in an agony all the time the cat was in the room. She wouldn't have rushed away like that if she had been able to help it. There is nothing she wants in the world more than to please you, if you will let her. Don't put difficulties in our way, father.'

'Our? Ah, you identify yourself with her against me already.'

'Of course I identify myself with her. I did that yesterday when I married her. That's what marriage means.'

'I don't want to discuss your views on marriage. If your wife wishes to please me, she must make an effort, and conduct herself like a decent member of society. She must keep regular hours, and attend family prayers, and give up looking like a chorus-girl.'

'Listen, father: I advise you to be careful. Of course you have a right, I suppose, to say what you like. I have to listen, and remember you are not quite like other people. But you gain nothing by abusing my wife. You do not mean a word of what you say. But I shan't be able to forget it, and it will always make a difference between us. One can put a beastly letter in the fire and forget it, but the scar of a beastly word never quite heals or hardens. So think twice before you make it too impossible for us to be friends any more.'

'By God! I didn't think you would forsake me so soon!'

'You make it impossible for anyone to remain with you. I have always dreaded you, and so has Barbara, but we never dreamed it could be as bad as this. Sometimes I think you must be mad.'

'You have always dreaded me?—you?'

'Of course. Why, your jealousy has always stood in my way. You kept me boxed up here all my young days; but it wasn't for my sake: it was for your own. You wanted me, not my happiness. And now that I have found my happiness, you are half mad with bitterness and rage. It is intolerable that you should make our lives so hard for us.'

'You are getting even with me, St. John, now—you are getting even with me now. I am sorry if I have hurt you. I beg your pardon. I beg Barbara's pardon. I suffer such a lot of these damned pains that I don't know what I am doing.'

But St. John's youth was too just to be generous.

'An explanation is not an excuse,' he answered. 'Of course I know what a bad time you have sometimes; of course I would do anything in the world to help you: but it isn't fair that you should make my wife miserable just because your own head happens to be aching—now is it?'

'You must not mind me so much. Dogs bite when in traps. I am a dog in a trap sometimes, and then I bite. It is not my fault.'

'No; but it is *our* fault if we stay by to be bitten.'

'You are hard, like all young men. Send me Barbara, and let me make my peace with her.'

A servant entered and addressed St. John.

'If you please, sir, Mrs. Ladon wants you. She is not well.'

'All right,' answered her husband. 'I am coming.'

'Stay with me a moment,' pleaded his father—'just a moment. My head is aching.'

'So is Barbara's, probably,' answered the other. 'I must go to her.'

'Won't you stay with me even a moment?'

'I must not keep Barbara waiting,' replied St. John, as he left the room in the servant's wake.

Mr. Ladon sat alone in the silence, gazing out into vacancy with a fixed and tragic stare. His lips moved vaguely, but no word came. Feeling unhappiness in the air, insulted Lady Lisa decided to let bygones be bygones. She turned and climbed on to her desolate master's knee, where she curled up in a pleasant ecstasy of purring reconciliation. Tempest Ladon fondled her with affection.

'You at least are my own true friend,' he said. Then his face darkened. 'And they—they cannot bear the sight of you,' he added.

CHAPTER IX

THE ensuing days were full of tension. Tempest Ladon, freed for the time from headaches, felt that he had conducted himself as an unreasonable, jealous brute. What more natural than that poor Barbara should want to have all the pleasure available out of her new home? What more natural than that her husband should resent the hasty words in which her father-in-law had painted her? Altogether Tempest Ladon determined to keep a stern guard upon himself, to be sensible and tolerant of the altered relations between himself and his son, and not to visit the sins of fact on Barbara's innocent though not defenceless head. As for St. John, he felt stricken with remorse and fear on contemplating the gulf that threatened to open between his father and himself. He realized that his harsh words had been too cruel, and resolved that they had done their work, and that thenceforth he would trust the modification of his father's mood to circumstances. Barbara, for her part, was unhappy at the dire hash of things that she had seemed to make from the very start of her new life at Ottemer. Everything that she had said and done was wrong and offensive. She determined to keep herself under rigid ward, so as not to irritate her sensitive father-in-law again. She even set herself desperately to tolerate the cats.

But, alone of the party, the Lady Lisa saw no reason for repentance or good resolutions. She had wronged no one; on the contrary, she had gone out of her way to be cordial

to the new-comer. And the new-comer had repaid her with unheard-of contumely, had hurled her to the ground with every symptom of disgust, and altogether had shown an ill-bred lack of self-control unworthy of any decent civilized being. Lady Lisa, though without malice, was not by any means without dignity or memory. She was not going to risk the recurrence of any such humiliation. Accordingly, whenever Barbara entered the room, Lady Lisa, however well established in comfort, made a point of instantly retiring under a chair or sofa, whence only two glaring, flamelike eyes betrayed her presence, fixed on Barbara in a stern unflickering glow. No blandishments could draw her thence, no apologies mollify the cold rectitude of her manners. If the door were open, she would leave the room with majesty; and if ever Barbara met her in the corridors and forced herself to make unwilling overtures, the Lady Lisa would pass her by without a glance or symptom of recognition. And the cat's stately behaviour added the last keen edge to the whetted razor of the situation's discomfort.

When one person is forcibly drilling himself into an attitude of mind, things are never smooth and easy; when three persons are doing so simultaneously the difficulty is more than sixfold exaggerated. At Ottemer all three actors were watching each other with anxiety, making their own words and actions diligently depend on the moods, known or divined, of the other two. Consequently no conversation, no action, could ever be free or natural; the triple life, as they were leading it, was a mere *tour de force*, an exhibition of emotional acrobatics and painful equilibrium, which could not possibly be long continued without a tragic catastrophe. Not by a word or a finger-tip would Barbara alter existing arrangements, or take any step to enjoy herself. Tempest was violently resisting every opportunity for bitterness that the situation afforded, and St. John was

engaged to absorption in desperately dancing a tight-rope course between his father and his wife, both of whom, in their impeccable quiet and preternatural amiability, gave dreadful indication of seething storms beneath the surface. Small wonder that the tension of things was too great for protracted endurance. But the strain might have been borne longer without rupture had it not been for the Lady Lisa.

Tempest found that the air of injured dignity assumed by Lady Lisa whenever Barbara appeared was the keenest among all his incessant irritations. It recalled his daughter-in-law's grossest, most ill-bred and inconsiderate burst of folly, and in the cat's unrelaxing hostility he found the strongest assurance that the situation could never be healed into ordinary friendliness. The existence of Lady Lisa seemed deliberately to promise nothing but more or less veiled enmity in the future between himself and Barbara—seemed definitely to underline all their reasons for reciprocal suspicion, and to point indomitably to the fact that as they had begun, so they must continue to the end.

And at last Tempest Ladon felt that he could bear no more. The stronger his wishes to be fair to Barbara, the more keenly rankled the many injuries inflicted by her presence, her mode of life, of speech, dress, motion—everything that she did. The whole position was intolerable; Tempest Ladon surrendered to his difficulties. Absurd, unspeakable as it was, he decided to let himself be driven from the field by a foolish, underbred girl; he determined to retire from Ottemer until the first crude offensiveness of her presence there should have been worn away by time. Hardly for thirty years had he left the place, and it seemed to him now the last limit of humiliation to be banished thus ignominiously by Barbara's invasion; but he saw that only some such decisive measure could save him sooner or later from some outburst of dislike that would achieve abruptly

the final irremediable estrangement between himself and his son.

In retiring before the intruder, he was offering up to his son's affection the whole mass of his self-respect; and he hoped that such an immolation would have its fair effect, and that the sacrifice would smooth away some of his trials, and at least preserve him some of his former friendship with St. John. The excuse offered, to salve the proper pride of all concerned, was that Mr. Ladon felt his bilious attack so obstinate and so annoying as to desire good London advice, instead of the doubtful vaticinations of the young local doctor. Nobody was deceived for a moment, though every one pretended to be. St. John and Barbara breathed sighs of concealed relief, and promised themselves that now, at last, they would have the untroubled honeymoon of which they had so regrettably been cheated. Tempest Ladon made rough, pathetic efforts not to notice how delighted his son and daughter were to be rid of him, and, steeling himself to bear the triumph of Melusina at dragging him from his lair, he wrote to his sister asking for accommodation.

As August was already now at its zenith, Lady Malham might well have been expected to be out of town, and her house to be swathed in brown holland. But, fortunately, St. John's victorious aunt had just been recalled from Homburg by news of her daughter Enid. Lady Enid, who, meanwhile, had been paying country visits, had come to the conclusion that she could not do better than marry her cousin, Lord Gordale, whose father had succeeded her own in the Malham peerage, and who would himself, in the course of time, become Lord Malham. Lady Enid considered the whole arrangement desirable in the extreme, and she found the man himself no less desirable than his situation. She had never thought herself a person to fall rapturously in love, but now she found Gordale astonishingly attractive, and, all things considered, quite indispensable to

her prosperity. The union, too, seemed clearly indicated by Providence, she thought, looking on Providence, as people usually do, entirely from her own point of view. Gordale fortunately agreed with her, and they were engaged.

Lady Malham had long made a habit of leaving her daughter's affairs to her daughter's own care. Lady Enid had always been eminently capable of looking after her own concerns. But, aloof though she held herself, Lady Malham had not always been able to restrain a qualm lest Enid should allow herself to be captured by one among the inconsiderable creatures whom she allowed to join her court of admirers. Lady Malham felt that Enid knew better than to do anything of the sort; however, the heart is weak, and, though Enid had never shown, hitherto, much sign of any such perilous possession, yet no one ever knew when it might not wake to life in the most undesirable direction. With the more joy, therefore, did Lady Malham receive the news that her daughter had done so eminently sensibly by herself. It was high time, too, for though Lady Enid had long successfully carried through the pretence of being pretty, yet the days were approaching when she would probably have to confess that she was not so in reality. Lady Malham hailed the engagement with delight, and hurried home from Homburg to congratulate her daughter.

She found not only Lady Enid, but the astounding announcement that her eremitic brother actually intended a visit to London after all these years. She commented mentally on the rust that had gathered over his social knowledge. He invited himself confidently to stay with her in Eaton Square, without the faintest apparent consciousness that London in August is a vast howling wilderness with only four or five million inhabitants. He seemed to assume that everyone was for ever in town. However, she had written at once to accept his proposal.

Meanwhile Lady Enid had come back to town to meet her mother, and to set arrangements on foot for her wedding. In the excitement of success she seemed to have grown handsomer. She had always contrived, by excellent clothes, a cool manner, and well-dressed hair, to get herself considered more or less of a beauty. The modern world, always ready to see beauty in what is bizarre and not obvious, had hailed with pleasure Lady Enid's clear and frosty features, her pale, crisp curls, her cold gray eyes, and determined mouth. But now there was no more need of imposture: Lady Enid, in her glow of happiness, was definitely beautiful in a strange and captivating way. Lady Malham, who on her homeward journey had suddenly fallen into a new terror that Enid's practical good sense might be leading her into a loveless and ambitious marriage, found herself completely reassured by the sight of her daughter. Evidently, however keenly Enid might realize the suitability of her engagement, her joy was not drawn in any great measure from gratified ambition, but from the personal pleasure of one whose bridegroom gives perfect satisfaction in his own personality, irrespective of whatever fortune or position he may stand for. And then, in the middle of the rejoicings, arrived Mr. Ladon, assisted by his valet, and by the Lady Lisa, who could by no possibility be left at Ottemer to the chances of her chilly feud with Barbara.

Lady Malham, joyous as she was, yet had detachment enough left her to notice the disastrous alteration of her brother since their last meeting. Now he seemed older by years. The journey had brought on his sickness and violent headache, and his annoying propensity to reel and stumble forced him to rely upon his valet's arm. Lady Malham was alarmed at the sight; her brother appeared to be breaking up before her eyes. At once she gathered that things could not possibly be going with perfect smoothness at Ottemer; she attributed much of Mr. Ladon's gloom to

worry and unhappiness. Substantially unreasonable as she saw his attitude to be, she felt perfect sympathy with it, and had the tact to say nothing to him of either St. John, Ottemer, or Barbara. Instead, she dilated on the charms of Lady Lisa, whose dignity of deportment when on a visit was beautiful to see. Tempest Ladon was grateful to her from the bottom of his heart for her reticence, and the absence of irritating elements helped still further to restore his spirits. He soon found himself involved in the rejoicings over Enid's engagement, and, desolate as London might be, he promised himself sound rest and refreshment from his visit.

As he had come to town ostensibly to see a doctor, he felt that he could not well refrain from doing so, though he shrank from the inquisition involved. Indeed, he looked forward with some satisfaction to being cured of his annoyingly persistent rheumatism, as well as dosed out of the obstinate bilious fit that had so disastrously affected his eyes and head. Lady Malham took the most cheerful view of his indisposition, not only because she thought cheerfulness advisable, but also because she herself considered him to have morbidly exaggerated a few symptoms of rheumatic gout, which reasonable prescriptions and encouragement would soon destroy.

'After all,' she said to him, 'everyone has gout or rheumatism nowadays, and there is nothing in the world more easily cured if you go to a good man. Why, look at Enid! She has just the same rheumatism in her arm that you have. Imagine it—at twenty-seven! Sometimes her arm is stiff and painful for days together, isn't it, Enid?'

Her daughter, who was writing a love-letter at the other end of the room, turned, and answered with precision:

'Dear me, yes, mother, and a vile nuisance it is, too. I must have it cured one day, when I have time. But, really, I cannot take to wearing rheumatic flannel at my time of

life. I must wait till I am a happy grandmother with no more looks to bother about. Rheumatism is the kind of annoying ailment which one never summons up energy to get cured, because it can be so easily done at any time. But if I am always going to find it as difficult to write to Edward as I do to-day, I shall certainly have to have something done about it, rheumatic flannel or no rheumatic flannel. It is getting worse too, I believe, as I grow more venerable.'

She returned to her letter, and Lady Malham resumed her encouragement of Tempest Ladon.

'There you see,' she said, 'how absurd the whole thing is. Probably all your biliousness comes from that and nothing else. Fortunately Dora St. Alkeld told me the other day that Sir Julius Mandelbaum is in town still. He is the great man for all that kind of thing, you know. We must write and make an appointment.'

Her brother was immensely cheered to think that a week or so would see him hale and hearty again; and, therefore, fortified against all the pinpricks of Barbara's behaviour and his son's defection. Three days later noon found him sitting confidently in the presence of Sir Julius, anxiously awaiting his cure.

Sir Julius Mandelbaum was a physician of some authority. Though youngish in years, he had the immemorial tact of the careful Hebrew. This it was that had enabled him to base his fortunes securely on a wonderful cure carried out in the person of a certain Royalty. The Royalty suffered from diverse pains that everyone, including Sir Julius and the Royalty herself, knew to result from persistent over-eating. But Sir Julius, with a marvellous display of tact, had succeeded not only in effecting a cure of the pains, but in effecting it without any laceration of his patient's dignity or obtrusive modification of her diet. Such powers were by no means overpaid by a baronetcy, and from that day forth

London had flocked to Sir Julius's door to be healed of its various ailments. In appearance he was blandly beautiful, and suggested a popular actor gone astray. His voice, his manner, were hesitating, soft and youthful. He was sedulously humane without being professionally smooth, with the result that everyone felt confidence in him, as in a sympathetic fellow-creature.

Mr. Ladon sat before him, rejoicing in the good news that had just been given him.

'Not rheumatism?' he was saying. 'Well, I am very glad to hear that. It will be all the more easily cured, then, I suppose? Rheumatism is not always a nice thing to get rid of. And I dare say these headaches and sickness are not biliousness either, then?'

Sir Julius's features, though filled with smiles, were curiously stripped of all expression.

'No,' he answered, 'that is not biliousness either. I think I can assure you confidently that you do not suffer from biliousness or rheumatism.'

'Well, thank you, Sir Julius. And will you give me a prescription?'

'In one moment, Mr. Ladon. Do you mind going over your family history a little more definitely? I do not wish to seem obtrusive, you know, but these items of information help us very often when we are working in the dark. You have lived almost alone for many years, I gather, and have suffered some shock or sorrow of some kind many years ago, which you have been dwelling on more or less persistently ever since. So much I have gathered. I ask you nothing more.'

'Yes, Sir Julius, you are right. And I suppose I may have become a little fanciful and inclined to brood over my aches and pains.'

'Quite so—quite so. And now, will you tell me, can you remember any details of your father's last illness and death?'

Mr. Ladon's face changed.

'I hope you will not ask me,' he replied. 'I cannot see that it touches my case, Sir Julius, and, if you will let me, I would rather not answer.'

'You will be giving me the very greatest assistance,' continued Sir Julius, with his most winning smile, 'if you can bring yourself to tell me this.'

Tempest Ladon made an effort.

'I suppose it is no use consulting you without being frank,' he said slowly. 'Well, then, I may tell you that my father suffered a great deal in his latter days, from what I never knew, and, indeed, it is all so long ago now that my memory is blurred on these points.'

'And then?'

'And then, though few people ever suspected it, I have reason to believe that he killed himself, Sir Julius.'

'Thank you, Mr. Ladon. I must apologize for pressing you so brutally; but you can have no conception how often the remotest details shed light upon a case.'

'Certainly, Sir Julius. . . . And now I should like to hear what it is that I am suffering from, if you will tell me. I am delighted to be clear of rheumatism. Nothing could be as bad as that. Is it liver, or what?'

Sir Julius smiled more than ever.

'Dear Mr. Ladon,' he said, 'I dislike bothering my patients with technical details that can only appeal to the expert.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Ladon, insisting, 'but after all, I have the first right to know what really is the matter with myself. Come, you can't deny me that, Sir Julius.'

'Oh, I have no wish to deny you, only I fear that the diagnosis would not interest you. You cannot expect to master all the hard words, can you? Well, if you insist. Don't blame me if I bore you. . . . Let us take the symptoms: first, rheumatic pains in the arm, and a tiresome

weakness of the voice—I am right? Thanks. Then, breaking out suddenly, and recurring, fits of violent occipital headache and vomiting, quite irrespective of diet; inability to perceive colours fairly, disorders of hearing, cramp-like spasms at the back of the neck, and great difficulty in walking, as you say, like a decent sober man. These are the most obvious, I think. Well, few things are ever certain in this world, you know, and how could it amuse or interest you to hear that you have been suffering, most likely, from a rather belated sarcoma of the posterior mediastinum, and that lately a secondary sarcoma has, I gather, sprung into disagreeable activity, which, all things considered, I should be inclined to locate in the cerebellum? There, I have been absolutely honest with you, Mr. Ladon, but you have not understood a word—now have you?—and, of course, you can't feel really interested.'

Sir Julius leaned back with a little laugh. His methods were Bismarckian, and he hoped that candour, supported by genial levity, would carry him round the point of peril without catastrophe. His expedient seemed likely to be successful. Tempest Ladon smiled.

'Yes,' he said, 'you are right: it is Greek to me. Anyhow, as long as it is not rheumatism, that is all I care for. And now, what treatment and medicines?'

'Well,' said Sir Julius, 'rest, you know, and distraction of mind from worry, will help you. If the pain is too trying, you might take some steps to mitigate it, though, of course, I am not going to prescribe you any narcotic myself. You will judge for yourself. Very light, though nourishing, diet is really your happiest course, combined with avoidance of trouble, exposure, or effort.'

'And how soon can I expect these tiresome headaches and rheumatic pains to leave off?'

Sir Julius turned a little grey. The path had brought him back into danger.

'Nature is wonderful,' he answered lightly, 'in her recuperative powers. If you follow the treatment I have recommended, and keep a good heart, you may hope that things may be very much better with you.'

'Yes,' said Tempest Ladon, 'but I don't want these pains to keep dallying on. How soon can I expect to be absolutely clear of them?'

Sir Julius, despite his experience, hesitated half a second too long. His difficulty in reply became perceptible to his patient. He looked up, to find Tempest Ladon's eyes fixed upon him in horror, and the answer froze on his lips. His silence was answer enough.

'Do you mean,' said Tempest Ladon slowly, 'that nothing can touch these pains of mine? Do you mean that they will go on getting more and more fearful, until I die? That is what you mean?'

Sir Julius would have spared his patient the useless bitterness of knowledge if he could. But now it was too late. The shadow of malignant death was dark across the room, and in the silence despair was lurking. Only remained to drape the ugly skeleton in a gown of delicate soothing words.

'My dear Mr. Ladon,' he said seriously. 'There is never any laying down of hard and fast rules for Nature. It is *possible* that the growths may quiesce, and perhaps cease to trouble you altogether. In any case, the symptoms may never become aggravated.'

'Yes, but is it likely?' answered Tempest Ladon in a strained whisper. 'I want to know the truth. You think that the pain will go on getting worse and worse—until something happens? Please tell me in plain English, without technicalities.'

Sir Julius looked him firmly in the face, and answered with a complete renunciation of his youthful manner.

'I am afraid I cannot give you good news, Mr. Ladon,'

he said. 'As you can imagine for yourself, the diseased growths are quite ungetatable. Medical treatment, again, can do nothing except palliate the more painful symptoms. I should advise you, by the way, to go on from me to Sir Michael Burbidge. He specializes on sarcomata, you know, and may give you fuller information. Meanwhile, if, as I said before, you are content to live very quietly, with absolute avoidance of emotional worry or physical exertion, I myself should pronounce it quite possible that you may succeed in mitigating the violence of the pain. But, since you ask me, I must tell you that in the majority of cases a brain-tumour goes steadily towards its termination, with a more or less constant aggravation of all the symptoms. Headache, for instance, may be expected to recur more frequently, and with greater intensity, as the growth increases. But, at the same time, you must remember that all I tell you is liable to correction by Nature. It is unsafe to say that anything is impossible in Nature. And you are quite justified in sustaining yourself with a hope that some merciful development may mitigate or abbreviate the course of your pain.'

'Then there is nothing for me to do but to grin and bear it as the thing gets steadily worse and more unbearable? Will my brain remain uninjured to . . . the end?'

'In all probability it will. Brain and consciousness frequently escape until death is very close at hand. Then the medulla may become disastrously affected, of course, but I think you can expect to have full possession of your faculties almost to the last.'

'And how long will this hell go on for?'

'Probably, as I said, the course of the disease will be rapid. A year will probably be the outside limit of time you will be called upon to endure.'

'A year . . . a year of this—this . . . getting more and more violent, and more and more persistent every day. No sort of escape from it except—that one inevitable way!'

‘Never forget, Mr. Ladon, that though medicine cannot cure, it can undoubtedly palliate. At the very worst it can give you euthanasia.’

‘Yes, I know . . . drugs, and so forth. I used to despise that sort of cowardice. Now I know that no price under heaven is too heavy to pay for a little holiday from pain. . . . God! to realize it. . . . Day by day, worse and worse. Fewer intervals of rest in each successive week. A steady accumulation of incurable suffering! And I was glad when you told me it was not rheumatism.’ Tempest Ladon laughed bitterly. Then a new idea struck him, and diverted his anxiety. ‘By the way,’ he said, ‘is this devilish thing hereditary, Sir Julius?’

Sir Julius looked doubtful.

‘In ordinary cases one would say not. But undoubtedly instances have been known in which cancer and sarcoma have passed from generation to generation. From what you tell me of your father, I should be inclined to fear that you had inherited a cancerous diathesis—a cancerous tendency.’

‘Which I suppose I can transmit to my descendants?’

‘There is always a certain danger of that, certainly. One can never say for certain that the inherited tendency has been entirely eliminated. In your own case, for instance, you have escaped until a very late period of life. It is not by any means common for a secondary brain-tumour to develop at your age. So that, seeing you ten or twenty years ago, I should have been inclined to smile over the notion of the hereditary cancerous taint which now your story and your circumstances incline me to suspect. Thus no prophecy of immunity can ever be made with absolute certainty.’

‘And I have a son who has just married,’ answered Mr. Ladon grimly. ‘A cheerful prospect, isn’t it, that he and his children are always liable to the same damnable martyrdom as mine?’

'Until the tumour has declared itself, Mr. Ladon, there is every reason for hope. You need not trouble your mind about such remote possibilities. Indeed, I should say that in all probability the disease will be found to have worked itself out in the three generations.'

'But still you can never tell for certain; you admit it. The cancer, or whatever you call it, may appear when he or they are my age. And it doesn't seem to me to matter whether one goes through hell at sixty or at sixteen. Agony is agony, whatever one's age. You acknowledge that there is ground for fear?'

'In this world there is always ground for hope as well as for fear, Mr. Ladon.'

'Possibly; but the fear is more reasonable than the hope, it seems to me. Well, I must thank you for your patience, Sir Julius. I shall go home and try to wrestle through the rest of my time as best I can. God, when I think my son may have to go through the same tortures as mine, it makes me wish that he were not my son. Good-bye, Sir Julius.'

Mr. Ladon stumbled heavily from the room. Sir Julius heaved a heavy sigh of relaxation, and soon departed to the golf-links with the triumphant feeling of one who has done an arduous morning's work.

CHAPTER X

Two hours later Mr. Ladon was driving back to Eaton Place. Before his eyes was blank darkness, and in his ears one word seemed to drown the tumultuous waves of London. Euthanasia, euthanasia! The outlandish, lovely syllables struck upon his consciousness as so many vibrations of sound. In his mind they became detached, as even a common word sometimes will, from all associations and considerations of meaning. But where an ordinary word, stripped of its meaning, sounds merely a ridiculous concatenation of noises, this new sequence of letters rang on the ear with a strange and mournful beauty. Euthanasia, euthanasia! In what far corner of the globe did that music carry meaning, to what human intelligences? Then the swirling mists around his consciousness began to clear, and through the dim shadows of the streets shone clear the meaning of the word. Euthanasia, euthanasia! That henceforward spelt all his comfort, all his hope, all his heart's desire. Slowly the full force of the old Greek word, so terribly made alive again, swelled and grew into his brain until all else was excluded. It brought back the smell of a dusky room, the feel of a velvet chair, the notes of a dull pontifical voice pronouncing doom in a tone of deep official calm. Euthanasia, euthanasia! The whole world resumed itself in that one sound, which had fallen so roundly into that momentous interview. Then, the sound had been only an incident of the conversation; now it was felt to be the Omphalos, the mystic pivot on which

rested all the world so far as Tempest Ladon was concerned.

From Sir Julius, on Sir Julius's recommendation, Mr. Ladon had gone on to a yet more august authority, the very Pope of brain disease. And this high personage—so illustrious that he spoke of Sir Julius with a tolerant smile—proved a well-spring of despair. Though he cavilled over Sir Julius's expressions, made light of his knowledge, and demonstrated his errors, yet in sum the second diagnosis had been identical with the first, though swamped in an overwhelming volume of minute and unintelligible detail. Setting technicalities aside as irrelevant, Mr. Ladon insisted on bearing stated baldly the effect on his own prospects of all these innumerable symptoms. And then came the same reply that Sir Julius had given. Short of the Pool of Bethesda, there was no possible chance of reasonable hope.

'All we can do,' said the great authority, 'is by artificial means at least to mitigate your discomfort.'

'And in the end—what?' asked Mr. Ladon grimly.

And with that came again the key-word of Tempest Ladon's fate.

'At least,' said the doctor, 'we may hope to secure euthanasia.'

Euthanasia! euthanasia! The word boomed across the earth. What was it? What did it mean? Peace at the end, a quiet and unconscious departure, a draught of artificial slumber to ease the passing of the dark waters. This was euthanasia—the happy death, the blessed despatch. And this was all that Mr. Ladon had to hope for, all he had to aim at, the one handhold of his earthly longings. Life had passed away into the realm of things impossible; all that remained was the chance of mollifying inexorable death.

Like most normally constituted egoists, Mr. Ladon had been accustomed to consider death an inevitable obstacle on

the path of every mortal life but his own. He had rarely thought of death for himself; the thing seemed preposterous, as it always does to the soul confident of its own existence and its own triumphant vitality. Now he was to end, to end—everything was to end. Strange, incalculable, dark, was this paradoxical prospect as he peered over the unfathomable abyss that had gaped so unexpectedly upon his road. In the moment of mortal surprise, he, like all others of the condemned, confounded thought of the body's death with groundless dread of the soul's extinction. It seemed to him, as he wondered over an altered world, that when his heart should fall silent and his blood lie stagnant, then all would be over with him, himself—that he would cease, would exist no longer, would have no more part in life. Christianity ingrains into its believers some such fantastic belief in the finality of death and the termination of the soul's development by arrest of the physical heart. That the one thing intangible and invisible in man can never by any possibility have any share in a purely visible and tangible bodily change never occurred to his mind, accustomed to the strange notion that death is a full-stop in life's sentence, rather than a mere inconsiderable comma. His body, as to most Christians, was ultimately the real 'he'; immortality was unthinkable, except by postulating in some far-off æon the renewed conglomeration of his scattered dust and bones, long since transmuted into other forms of life. This material superstition was the one faint shadow thrown across his heart of the universal truth that life everywhere and always is a thing beyond the reach of destruction, though individuality may melt away in the enormous kaleidoscope of cosmic change, where nothing dies and nothing keeps its ancient shape. For there is no death and no destruction of things invisible, only the age-long purification of the incorruptible.

But Mr. Ladon's mind, brought face to face with the

immediate fact, had no wrought-out thought of his own, had nothing but second-hand formulæ to set between himself and the horror that stared him in the eyes. In dread of bodily death, in veneration of the skeleton, all Westerners pay a heavy price for the beauties of their Gospel. Mr. Ladon saw no prospect but the narrowing walls of doom, with blank darkness at the end, and a fiery judgment far away beyond, after an unexplained and contradictory interval of nonentity. Like a sickening bruise rather than a clean wound, slowly the consciousness filled him that soon his individuality, his soul, his life, would be a blank . . . nothing. And the process of this death, too, gripped him by the throat with its horror. Pain and pain, and heavier pain up to the very end; and, after the end, darkness, judgment, and everlasting joy or agony, in payment of so infinitesimal a dewdrop of time as are sixty years of life in the unthinkable ocean of eternity.

He reached Eaton Square, and got up to the drawing-room—how, he never knew. His sister was out, and Lady Enid sat alone at her writing-table looking at a wedding-present with doubtful eyes.

‘One would have thought a motor-car was ugly enough in all conscience in real life,’ she said to her uncle, ‘without imitating the thing in diamonds. Did you ever see anything more gratuitously frightful?’

She held up the offending gift—a large brooch of crusted diamonds, made to imitate a bulky Panhard, with two rubies for lamps. Tempest Ladon looked at it without seeing it. All the traditions of his birth and breeding were doing battle with the horror in his heart. No one—no one in the world—should suspect what he had heard that morning; no one should have the right, the odious right, to pity and condole and mourn over him. He would not sadden Enid’s marriage, nor draw cheques upon her sorrow, when she was bankrupt of everything but joy.

'It's not beautiful,' he answered.

'The worst of being married,' said Enid, 'is that one has to be grateful for all these horrors. The strain of constant lying fairly wears one out. Mabel Denton sent me this. She dresses excellently well, and has a quite good house, and yet she sends me this lop-sided monstrosity. Isn't it strange? And Cousin Letitia, who goes everywhere tied up with about four yards of pearls, has given me a small German-silver clock, set all round with large red Rhinestones.'

'Have you had many presents yet?' asked her uncle with deliberation. She was making the first step easy in his path of self-repression.

'Oh, they dribble in. The rush has not begun yet. What are you going to give me, Uncle Tempest?'

'What would you like?'

'Please don't ask me. A present loses all its value if the receiver has to choose it. I suppose a present is meant to be a symbol of the giver's friendship, not a tribute to the receiver's greediness.'

'I'll give you good news for a first instalment,' said Mr. Ladon suddenly, with a dull ferocity of manner. 'Sir Michael Burbidge says that I have not got either biliousness or gout. Is not that good news?'

'Oh, I quite forgot about the doctor. But I thought you were going to Sir Julius Mandelbaum?'

Mr. Ladon realized the false step he had made.

'One cannot have too much of a good thing,' he answered, 'so I went on to Sir Michael to see what he would say.'

'And he was favourable, too?'

'More or less, more or less. One must be careful, of course.'

'What does he tell you to do?'

'As far as I can make out, my best chance is to go to

bed and live on gruel. The better I am the worse I shall be, it appears.'

'Your news does not sound extraordinary cheerful,' said Lady Enid, licking up an envelope. 'What do they say is the matter?'

'Mr. Ladon was carried away by the irony of the dialogue, and the delusion that he was being wonderfully successful in his assumption of indifference.

'Oh, sarcomas and things,' he answered.

'I can scarcely hear what you say, Uncle Tempest; your poor voice seems worse than ever to-day. Sarcomas?'

'Yes, that is the real reason of my rheumatic arm and my huskiness, it seems. It is something wrong with the posterior mediastinum. Now, are you much the wiser?'

'How very weird! It sounds like something belonging to a motor-car. Well, I suppose it's nothing serious. I wonder whether I have got a—what do you call it?—a sarcoma and a posterior mediastinum? I shall feel quite defrauded if I haven't. Perhaps they are heirlooms in the Ladon family.'

'So it appears, as far as I can gather. And I think collaterals had better be content without.'

'How disgustingly dog-in-the-mangerish!' answered Lady Enid lightly. 'That is so like a head of a family: take everything for yourself, and let the junior branches get along as best they can without. There is something perfectly thrilling about a weird inheritance of symptoms in a family—until they are serious, of course, Heaven defend us! If it were anything painful and horrid, I am sure the head of the family might have it all, as far as I am concerned. I am not selfish.'

'I am glad you approve of the Ladon tradition, Enid. But I think I will not offer to share it with you.'

'Not even as a wedding-present? You are no true uncle. But, if a rheumatic arm is all you mean by your unpro-

nounceable names, you need not trouble, thank you. I believe I have inherited the family sarcomas and things just as much as you. But I thought sarcoma meant drowsiness, not rheumatism. However, you need not rejoice in your monopoly too soon. I'll go and see Sir Michael for myself.'

Blank, sick, preposterous fright seized Mr. Ladon.

'What are you talking of, Enid?' he gasped in a whisper. 'You must not do anything of the sort. I mean—why in the world should you? You are perfectly well. There's nothing the matter with you.'

'How do you know that? Didn't I tell you that I have the queerest rheumatism in my arm, just like yours, sometimes? And it has been getting much worse lately, too. I am not going to be defrauded of the family tradition. I'll go and see Sir What's-his-name to-morrow.'

The room rocked before Mr. Ladon's clouded eyes. With a rush there surged over the barriers of his self-control that fearful word 'hereditary.' Wave on wave of dread besieged him. Was it possible, by some malignant devil's work, that the heritage of the dead man had descended as well to the grand-daughter as to the son? There was no clear reason against the horrible suspicion—only hope, that frailest of broken reeds. Yet this sudden hint of fresh disaster might yet be without significance. It might only be some silly coincidence, this ominous-seeming resemblance of pain. Anyhow, at all costs, the girl, whether in danger or no, must be headed off from discovery of the truth. It was unthinkable that he should permit his carelessness to let any ray of light into the bride's innocent darkness, whatever might be the bearing of these symptoms she so lightly mentioned. He hesitated, casting round for some way of swift evasion from the dialogue.

'You must not, you must not!' he stammered, raising his voice with great effort.

Lady Enid opened great gray eyes at him. A troubled look came into her face.

'You are all right, really, aren't you, Uncle Tempest?' she said. 'Those horrid men did not give you any particular complaint, did they? Do tell me. You seem excited under the surface somehow, and—you almost make me afraid of something. I am much too modern to endure that, you know. So do answer me.'

Of course he lied. There was nothing else to do.

'Why, naturally there is nothing,' he said. 'The fact is,' he continued, as a happy afterthought, 'that I eat and drink too much. I did not like to say it out plainly, but there it is. I am to take to aerated waters and hygienic biscuits. So you must not wonder if I am a little startled at the news.'

Collected for a desperate effort, his powers answered to his call. Lady Enid was tranquillized.

'It is too bad,' she said. 'You disturb me when I am writing these eternal letters, and make believe you are ill. You frighten me half out of my senses, and then you simply tell me that you are a pig. Oh, Uncle Tempest!'

'Why, we are the healthiest family in Yorkshire,' he continued, 'and most of us live for a century.'

'Heaven defend me!' replied his niece. 'Then I suppose I must eat too much, too, by the way,' she went on after a pause, 'as I seem to have the same complaint as you.'

'You have not, I tell you, Enid,' he answered with suspicious eagerness.

'I don't see why not,' his niece rejoined, 'nor why you should make such a fuss if it is only a sort of greedy gout like yours. Yes, I shall go to Sir Michael Burbidge to-morrow, and get him to give *me* some hygienic biscuits and aerated waters. It is absurd for a healthy young woman like me to go about with a useless arm, as if I had cancer, or leprosy, or something horrid like that.'

'Listen, Enid,' said her uncle hoarsely. 'There is no reason why you should go pestering Sir Michael. I'll tell you what waters and biscuits you will want, so that you can save your guineas and cure your arm at the same time.'

'This is what I call noble,' answered Lady Enid. 'Both generous and economical. Let me see your prescription, then.'

'I haven't got it; I sent it to the biscuit place,' said her uncle glibly in his despair. 'Anyhow, I will tell you all about the cure, and then you must promise me not to go near Sir Michael or any other of these doctors.'

'But I don't see why I shouldn't,' protested Lady Enid. 'Are you afraid they would frighten me, or pretend to discover something the matter with me? After all, it makes one feel happier to have a doctor's advice.'

'I assure you it would not make you any happier, Enid. And besides, when you are so taken up with marrying, you don't want to have any disturbing interests. No; if I let you share my biscuits, you must promise me faithfully not to go near a doctor.'

'I can't make out why you make such an enormous point of it,' replied Lady Enid doubtfully. 'Have you got something up your sleeve? What are you thinking of behind that great forehead of yours, Uncle Tempest?'

'Don't you see, Enid, if you take my cure, there is no reason why you should go near Sir Michael. Going to him does not make the slightest difference.'

'I know. That is why I can't understand why you are so very anxious that I should not go. It cannot make any difference one way or another. So why make such a fuss?'

'Because it is ridiculous, let me tell you, for a young woman like you to run about spending her money on doctors, and thinking of diseases, when she ought to be busy with her trousseau and her bridegroom. That is why I am anxious that you should not make a fool of yourself with

any doctor in London, Enid. Time enough to go to them when you feel really ill.'

'Well, well, probably you are right. Heaven knows, I've got enough to think about as it is. I may as well save my guineas, and my time, and my cab-fares, as you say.'

'And you know perfectly there is nothing in the world the matter with you except imagination,' pursued her uncle, overdoing his effect.

'That's absurd; I have less imagination than any woman in London. I'm not likely to fancy I've a gouty or rheumatic arm, or whatever it is, unless I really have. If you talk like that I shall have to go to Sir Michael, after all.'

Mr. Ladon became abject. 'I am sure I apologize, Enid,' he answered. 'Of course, you are not a *malade imaginaire*. I ought to have remembered how sensible you always are. I know you have gout in your arm. But my cure will certainly do away with all your troubles.'

'I hate pain far too much to imagine I've got it if I haven't,' continued Lady Enid. 'The real thing is quite enough for me without the shadow. Thank Heaven, I have never have had much more than toothache in my life; but if I had to go through any worse pain for any length of time, I think I should go out of my mind with terror—I believe I might kill myself, Uncle Tempest. Pain is the one thing in the world that is perfectly terrible—— *Really*, Uncle Tempest, what a morbid and churchyardy conversation this is! How ever did we get into it? Remember that I am to be married very shortly, and let us be more festive. You have not told me yet what you are going to give me besides this good news of yours.'

'You haven't told me what you would like yet.'

'Well, though I hate motors made into brooches, I love them in real life, Uncle Tempest. Edward has about four already; but what I do want most in the world is one of my very own—a nice sort of little thing that one can career

about in easily all over the place. Mother is giving me her jewels, and a wonderful new diamond breastplate affair, so that you are my only other near relation that I can come down on for a car. Do give me a motor, Uncle Tempest !'

Tempest Ladon, whose conversation hitherto had been painfully evoked from nightmare, was at last recalled into real life by the mention of his pet antipathy. He flushed heavily.

'If you think I am going to give you one of the confounded things, Enid,' he replied, 'you are thoroughly mistaken. There are enough fools and bounders already careering about everywhere, as you call it, over dead bodies, without having English ladies and gentlemen joining in the degrading vulgar amusement. I had no idea how far the disgusting craze had gone till I got to London and found my life at the mercy of every reckless blackguard got up like a deep-sea diver. From above Ottemer, thank the Lord, one can only see the cloud of white dust with which they pollute the road through the valley, miles below. No motors for any niece of mine, Enid, if I can help it.'

Lady Enid hated being scolded or made a fool of. Her manner became very cool and superior as she answered.

'Of course, everything must seem strange to you,' she said, 'after having lived out of the world so long ; but you will have to move with the times. I know Barbara means to have a motor at Ottemer before very long.'

'Of course the place belongs to her,' replied Mr. Ladon, choking.

'Of course ; and besides, really, it is absurd for you to confound all motor-drivers in one condemnation. There are good and bad.'

'Look at all the accidents one hears of.'

'Look at all the millions of happy, uneventful drives one never hears of. No, Uncle Tempest, it is no use standing against the times. I think you will give me a motor.'

'I'll do nothing of the kind.'

Lady Enid looked nonplussed. Then she smiled, as at a happy thought.

'Let me see,' she said, ruminating, 'what is Sir Michael Burbidge's address?'

Mr. Ladon stared in horror.

'What do you mean, Enid?'

'I think I really ought to consult him, you know,' replied his niece.

After a whirling pause, Mr. Ladon took up the dropped thread.

'What kind of motor do you prefer?' he asked.

'What I should really like,' answered his niece calmly, 'is a small Napier. Will you give me one, Uncle Tempest?'

'I have been thinking. No doubt there is something in what you say. One must not allow one's self to get prejudiced. Motor-cars are of great value in their way. And, of course, one's attention is only drawn to their mishaps, as you say.'

Lady Enid was merciful enough to make no comment on her uncle's stumbling and reluctant recantation. She waited patiently. He began again.

'How does one get hold of the things?' he asked.

'I'll tell Edward to go with you to the place,' said Lady Enid demurely. 'He will help you choose one. Thank you so much, Uncle Tempest.'

Though triumph spoke calmly in her manner, it was filled with an undertone of keen bewilderment. She had used a strong weapon, apparently divining some of its strength, but without the faintest glimmer of understanding as to why it should be so effective. At that point, while Mr. Ladon was digesting his defeat, his sister sailed splendidly into the room, flushed beyond her usual waxen pallor by the success of her morning's shopping.

'I promised not to tell you, Enid,' she began, 'but I think I ought to, so that you can be properly surprised;

but Edward has bought you that string of pearls we saw in Mount Street last week.'

'How very extravagant and absurd!' replied her daughter, with gleaming eyes. Then she gently added, 'And Uncle Tempest has promised me a motor.'

Lady Malham turned to her brother.

'Of all people *you*, Tempest!' she exclaimed. 'But do tell me what Sir Julius said. I am so sorry to have been out when you got home. Really, Tempest, you must not think yourself neglected, or in the way, but you can have no conception how one's head gets crowded up with hundreds of different affairs at once. So you must excuse your poor sister for seeming careless, and tell me quickly all about Sir Julius. We have to see Madame Heydinger after lunch, Enid, remember.'

Mr. Ladon explained to his sister an amended version of what had occurred at the doctor's, and announced that he meant to return to Ottemer on the morrow. She, for her part, filled with her own innumerable cares, lent a smiling, but more or less indifferent, countenance to his tale. She was glad that he did not propose to be ill in the house. She was relieved and unsuspicious of his tale, because she was so well prepared to welcome it. Sick people in the house, even brothers, are apt to be a nuisance when weddings are being busily arranged.

'One knows,' she said, 'how utterly bored you must be here. Nothing can be duller than to see other people for ever fussing about their own concerns. I do wish you had chosen a happier time to come to me—a happier time for you, I mean. You must try again. One good thing is that you have found out all about your tiresome headaches and gout. I always told you it was gout; and London is the worst place in the world for a cure. You will be ever so much happier living on biscuits and Salutaris at Ottemer, in that gorgeous air. Are you really going home to-morrow,

then? Must you start by the earliest train, I wonder? We shall be rushing all over London, as usual, so that otherwise I am afraid you may be left alone. Enid, I am going to show Tempest that dinner-service that Maria sent. Come along, Tempest.'

Lady Enid remained alone, closing her bureau with delicate deliberation. Bewilderment and strenuous thought were still visible in her clear, pale face. 'It is a comfort about the car,' she thought; 'but I wonder—oh, I do wonder why he is so anxious that I should not go to Sir Michael. I will wire and make an appointment there to-morrow, after Uncle Tempest has gone.' Still puzzling, she slowly left the room.

CHAPTER XI

ST. JOHN and Barbara, meanwhile, had been placidly abandoning themselves to the delightful solitude of the honeymoon. Anticipating that Mr. Ladon would stay in London for some time, they had been in no hurry to gulp the fulness of their pleasure, but had allowed day gently to glide past day while they savoured slowly the completeness of their happiness. Therefore, upon their delights the news of their father's unexpected return came as a dire reverse, cutting their pleasure in the very bud, like an unanticipated frost. Barbara frankly deplored the tidings, and St. John made vain efforts not to consider his father's return to Ottemer a terrible and disastrous intrusion. Facts, sooner or later, force their recognition upon all of us, and, though St. John Ladon made no attempt to tabulate his forecasts, he vaguely realized that the true future must be very different from the rosy prospect he had fancied. His wife was no less adorable than before; but now the mists of romance were vanishing, and she stood out a vividly human figure, filled with emotions, passions, jealousies, that were never suspected before, while she had only been a dim and distorted phantom of the haze. Now, in the plain light of day, the situation was seen to bristle with impossibilities. St. John belonged to that common type of man who foresees neither accurately nor far into emotional perils, or the best chances of averting them. He threw up his hands and decided to drift with the tide, trusting that after many rubs everyone would eventually shake down somehow, or else

that some unforeseen and blessed chance might intervene to cut the knot. The nature of the chance he hoped for he took pains not to analyze.

As for Barbara, this unexpected return of her father-in-law seemed the pinnacle of her difficulties. Although her honeymoon was not yet old, she already realized that she was not getting on well. Her husband was a diamond in whose brilliance she daily discovered some new facet of light, yet she began to understand that even a husband is not the whole of life to a married woman. The surrounding atmosphere had begun to prey upon her. For one thing, the weather's welcome had changed into hostility. There was no more sun in Ottemer. A dark and evil sky seemed to press close upon her head, so low over the hills lay the unalterable canopy of greyness. The hills themselves were now of a stern and adamant tone, offering no encouragement to happiness or life. Into the great house no cheerfulness penetrated. The long passages were tenanted by a dim and ghostly light, and beyond the dreary alignment of windows the lake of Ottemer offered a leaden monotony of chilly gloom. Day succeeded day, and outside the walls she heard no sound of life nor voice, but only the keening of a vicious, soulless wind, or the heart-breaking wail of peewits far up the grey lid that covered in the cup of moorland where Ottemer lay. Her training and life had not fortified her to face such intangible sorrows. Daily the malignant dulness of the place sank into her very bones. Any human or social unpleasantness she thought she could have borne, but not this inhuman remoteness from all the things to which she had ever been accustomed.

The house, also, never extended to her that welcome which she had found lacking even on her bridal morning. It remained cold and unfriendly, at the best only tolerant of the new-comer. Bred as she was to the lax gaiety of Surbiton, the cold correctness of Ottemer struck her with a

continual chill. Hitherto she had had no experience of an old-fashioned, stately house, and she found its influence now entirely oppressive. To her the perpetual air of vacancy in the great rooms was terrible. Everything seemed always to be in its place. The big rooms looked as if no one lived in them. The attempt to scatter ornaments about egregiously failed. Even Barbara found the effect intolerable. If ever she dropped things on the floor, or littered a table with promiscuous belongings, some invisible sprite seemed to tidy everything away as soon as her back was turned, and restore the room to its invariable aggravating air of spotless spaciousness. All her efforts after untidiness were thwarted. The flowers she crowded into every available corner soon began to look as formal and uncompanionable as their surroundings; her scattered books were picked up and put by in serried bookcases; the garden hats, the gloves, the baskets she threw about on different chairs, soon reappeared on the hall-table arranged in impeccable order.

At last she arrived at such a pitch of exasperated nervousness as to be timid of the very servants. At Morland House ease and friendliness had marked the relations between Cousin Coralie and her domestics. The butler gave information with an air of more or less respectful intimacy when required; the footmen took open interest in the doings and enjoyments of their employers; the housemaids were to be depended upon for sympathy in any domestic crisis. Among such surroundings Barbara had unconsciously grown up with a rather exaggerated belief in the conversational value of servants. But Ottemer, for more than thirty years under the sole rule of a single man, whose main occupation was the maintenance of due dignity and state, had come to move at last with rigid and mathematical precision of observance, worthy almost of the Burgundian Court at its greatest. Everything was to be done at such and such a time, in such

and such a way. Coffee came, newspapers, letters, notes, all brought by the proper person in the proper manner at the proper time, and laid in the proper place. To a free-lance like Barbara the invariableness of it all was intolerable. Mr. Ladon had no small sense of his own importance and the importance of his house, a sense fostered in these latter days by his own seclusion and the adulation accorded to Ottemer by a sparse and provincial neighbourhood. Therefore, he had devoted his empty days to fixing and consolidating the hieratic procedure of his household ceremonies. The orderly methodizing of his life flattered his pride and filled his leisure, till in the course of years it had come at last to be a perfect cult of smooth precision and rule. The servants, under the same influences, had abetted their master's designs, and cultivated domestic ceremonial to the highest and most old-fashioned point. Then into this well-oiled machinery was suddenly flung poor Barbara, with all her unconscious dislike for order except as a novelty, all her impatience of formality, all her great and obtrusive companionableness. The result was a hideous, jarring disorder, in which the individuality of Barbara was soon crushed out of importance.

Her efforts broke vainly on the wall of dignity against which she threw herself. No one met her advances with any symptoms of the human friendliness she desired. The housekeeper was a monumental matron who made Barbara feel herself an intruder and a parvenue. And as for Barclay, Mrs. Ladon, accustomed to Cousin Coralie's warm collaboration with the butler in the achievement of her quests, now found herself chilled to the bone by his perfectly correct and lifeless obedience. Soon she found that she was set completely outside the movement of the household—treated as a guest rather than a mistress. All her wishes were disapproved, though obeyed for the time being. Her personality seemed a matter of contemptuous indifference to

these perfect machines that served it, her presence to be regarded as a matter more or less irrelevant and negligible. She wanted the wrong things done at the wrong time, in the wrong way, by the wrong people. And, of course, everything that she desired was instantly carried out ; but an intangible suggestion of disdainful remonstrance filled the air, and poisoned the icy deference with which Barclay did some service properly the head housemaid's business, or the footmen brought tea into some strange room at some novel hour. St. John, naturally, was of no avail against this distress. He could not have understood his wife, even had she had the courage to complain, where there was clearly no possible ground for complaint. He found, of course, nothing to notice in the smooth precision that to her was so oppressing. Further, these were matters on which no woman could confide in a man, for her very shame's sake. Barbara kept a bitter silence, and suffered the burden of her position. Her husband frequently told her that she was a pearl. Distorting his epithet, she told herself that indeed she was the pearl, and Ottemer the oyster, that had enveloped her in a glittering isolation, so as not to be fretted or rubbed raw by the irritation of her presence ; so completely did the house enforce her seclusion within herself.

So the days were passing in outward joy, but inward worry, when the solitude of the new-married was interrupted by the telegram from Mr. Ladon announcing his return. No more even of independence for Barbara, and the hated cats would emerge from their blessed seclusion in the housekeeper's room, once more to creep along the corridors and horrify their enemy at every turn and corner of the house. Barbara's tentative efforts at establishing a life of her own amid the iron regulations of Ottemer must now be fiercely fought for, or for ever abandoned. Prayers, sardonic conversation, restraint, rules, and the accursed

shadow of old-established custom threatened to close her in on every side. And, worse on worse, poor Barbara had done an awful thing, expecting no such sudden vengeance. For in the extremity of the worry that she could not confide to her husband, she had so furiously felt the need of companionship as to write impulsively, on some half-permission of St. John's, a warm invitation to Cousin Coralie and such of her friends as she should choose, to come and spend a week or two at Ottemer. The answer had not yet arrived, but Barbara already was in an agony of anticipation. What fearful storms would have to be lived through if Cousin Coralie accepted! And she was only too sure to do so. She would not lose an opportunity of visiting Ottemer, as Barbara, in a spasm of married as well as of defiant pride, had painted the house that tyrannized over her. Oh, if only Mr. Ladon had prolonged his delightful absence as much as he had given them fair reason to expect, Cousin Coralie might have come and gone without any harm being done. Barbara was terrified on all sides, though never quite realizing the full enormity of her rash action. She hardly liked to tell her husband what use she had made of his somewhat vague and inattentive consent to her suggestion, but hoped against hope that some merciful cold or chill might interfere to prevent indomitable Lady Morland's invasion of Ottemer.

But Barbara was a woman of strong, though short-lived, spirit. Hostility and peril kindled her to a momentary flare of new energy and courage. Unfortunately, at such moments Blackpool came uppermost in her character. The more harassed was Barbara the more defiant she grew. And now came the crowning disaster of Mr. Ladon's return, and the almost certain advent of the Countess-cousin. With her back to the wall Barbara determined to face matters out, to carry things with a high hand, to insist on her imagined rights as mistress of the house—in short, to

make herself as objectionable as might be necessary in the sacred cause of independence. Even her husband could not help noticing the intensification of her moods, as the hour of his father's return drew nearer, momentarily screwing up her defiance to the pitch of exaltation.

And, after all, that Friday afternoon Barbara assumed her bluest frock and her most violently purple hat in vain. For the father-in-law, whose return she was thus accoutred to meet, failed to arrive; and all her little innovations, carefully insisted on for the occasion, were to pass unnoticed. For, instead of Mr. Ladon, came late in the day a second telegram, announcing that he meant to break the journey and spend the night in Leeds. Barbara felt the anticlimax. It was probable that her audacity, strenuously fostered for to-day, might, by very reason of its deliberateness, be stale and flat to-morrow. All her activities were left in arrest. Even the rare post which fed intellectual life at Ottemer brought her no answer from Cousin Coralie, but only two dull bills and an understamped receipt—no other news of any kind for her or her husband. St. John himself had only one very brief communication from Lady Malham, announcing his father's return, her joy at his delightful recovery, and her inability to say more, thanks to the absorbing happiness in which she and Enid were plunged by the charms of Gordale and the affairs of the marriage. Barbara was far from caring whether Enid loved her future bridegroom or no, and in her defeated mood of excitement she disdainfully contrasted her own existence of thwarted dulness with the whirl of pure satisfaction in which her chilly and unemotional cousin seemed to be involved by the pleasures of a love affair which all her world might well consider too suitable to be genuine. It was hard to imagine Enid in love with anyone, yet in love she clearly was, and everything went well with her, to an extent exasperating to one whose crown of roses was so thickly set with thorns as

Barbara's. For a young bride Mrs. Ladon's feelings that Friday afternoon were sombre, and, one may hope, unusual. But in her mind, for an hour or two, surrounding circumstances outweighed even her husband, and obscured his importance. Not even in the first fine rapture of passion can one be always fixed in the same invariable ecstasy. Sometimes other matters force themselves on our attention; and, if they be unpleasant, may for a moment overshadow our joy by force of contrast—darkness with light—though at the end of the path, when full backward perspective is attained, they only give relief and brilliance to the tract of sunlight whose dazzling road they so effectively bedapple.

Meanwhile Mr. Ladon was established in a hotel sitting-room at Leeds, depressing and void as hotel sitting-rooms almost invariably are. Amid antimacassars, horse-hair sofas, and oleographs of the late Queen, he sat and meditated in an atmosphere of gloom as powerful as that which he was breathing. Once more he was filled with good resolutions, and, as often happens, his good resolutions were tinged with bitterness. He determined definitely to keep a locked mouth on his evil prospect, to spare St. John and Barbara any knowledge of his impending agony; to bear his burden all alone, without bowing young shoulders prematurely beneath a share of its intolerable weight. Enforced by Pride, by Good-feeling, by Generosity, these honest and noble resolutions admitted also Spleen and Jealousy to the council that ratified them. When all motives everywhere are pure and unmixed, then, and then alone, may we mortals fairly blame or praise. But now, in the highest is always a germ of the lowest, as in the lowest there is always some little infinitesimal glimmering of the higher. Pride and Self-reliance bade Mr. Ladon bear his trouble alone; but Pride was angry, as well as self-righteous, and declared viciously that 'nobody cared,' and that therefore nobody should be given an opportunity for wearisome hypocrisy.

‘What does it matter,’ said Mr. Ladon’s jaundiced Pride—‘what does it matter to St. John and Barbara whether I die to-day or to-morrow—in pain or in peace?’ Therefore they were to be barred from his gruesome confidence. Jealousy, too, was spiteful and active in giving of the good advice. ‘St. John and Barbara are so wrapped up in each other that it would be cruel to sever them even for a month by intrusion of a sick man’s sufferings.’ Thus Jealousy artfully stabbed herself with an air of sacrifice, and rubbed the wound red, until Mr. Ladon found himself thinking with mournful triumph that one day the inseparable pair would be sorry, when they knew all too late. The time-worn old idea, that has given so much comfort to so many of the angry who wish to think themselves noble, now came to the call of Mr. Ladon’s Jealousy, and soothed him with bitter unction, suggesting a day of satisfaction when at last the young people should discover the whole noble truth, and grievously deplore their blindness. Yes, that would be full atonement, even if a posthumous atonement. This notion of a cowardly vengeance after death is a measure of the sick soul’s childish weakness. When its complete ignominy and vain cruelty cease to strike the mind that hankers for it, then indeed is the state of peril drawing near. ‘You will be sorry for this some day,’ with its self-flattering picture of belated repentance over a wronged and lowly grave, is one of the later stages of moral phthisis. In Mr. Ladon’s case, perhaps, the morbid feeling may be excused by his certainty of imminent death. His soul was weakened by no phantom, but by the menace of a very grim reality. For years he and his few friends had considered his character, however rough and rugged, the impregnable four-square citadel of independence, honesty, and strength. Now that disease came creeping round the walls, Jealousy betrayed the weak spot in his citadel, and opened the secret door to moral Cowardice and her army of vices in disguise.

At the bottom of Mr. Ladon's dumb, blind anger against God and the world lay the hideous injustice of the contrast between his own shadowed road and the sunlight through which all those other lives were moving. What had he done—he, the observant, the communicant, the church-goer, the sedulously just and pure—what had he done thus to be harried down into the darkness by pain and despair? The thing was monstrous. If this could happen, then where was equity? where was the use of righteousness? where was due requital of all the self-restraint and conscious excellence that had kept his own life so effectively faultless before the God of the Anglicans? Mr. Ladon looked on righteousness, as does so large an army of his fellow-mortals, not as an end in itself, but as a means towards salvation—as a sort of credit account in the recording angel's book, to be drawn upon in the Day of Judgment against the claims of the devil. So much goodness fairly entitled one to counterbalancing services at the hand of the Omnipotent; and sixty years of orthodox piety should certainly be repaid by Heaven with a due number of worldly advantages, or else the Creator must be regarded as a defaulting bankrupt, only paying so much in the pound for values received in the way of church-going and abundant offertories. Mr. Ladon had not yet consciously reduced this prevailing notion to a regular schedule or tariff of virtues and their expected equivalents, as do so many perfectly admirable people. He had not yet come to calculate that a successful bazaar ought to be good for a daughter well married, or that the endowment of a hospital cot should certainly insure a son's pre-eminence in examinations. But dimly in his heart, as in the hearts of all to whom religion is rather a means than an end, there lurked the strong feeling that Heaven must in justice give good money for favours received. There was horrible, ungodly, devilish injustice in a decree that made him, the diligently righteous, a prey to the

fiercest powers of pain and darkness. There was no longer any fitness in things. Heaven seemed to have put up its shutters, and repudiated its debts.

And the young—look at them, consider them, so heedless, so unreflecting, so unobservant; the young, whose church-going is perfunctory and unwilling, whose offertories are small, whose benefactions few—are they to be repaid with long years of life and unclouded happiness, while their virtuous elders go down in tragedy to the grave? The young are not devout; the young are heretical, riotous, immoral. It is abominable that they should be requited with joy and success. . . . Oh, Tower of Siloam, how the Commentator of your fall has failed to convince the world that your crushed victims of accident were not marked down for the special vengeance of Heaven. Oh, feasted prodigal, how many of the righteous read your tale with the sad bewilderment of your brother, not realizing that in you it is not vice that is rewarded, while virtue goes bare, but certain faith in the Holy Wisdom that in you is made gloriously triumphant.

Mr. Ladon dared not trust himself to think of St. John and Barbara; but when he considered the case of Enid, he felt as the impeccable brother of the prodigal. Surely *he* had never erred; surely *she* had never taken pains to walk in the straight way: for her was the banquet of joy made ready, while for him the mingled vinegar and gall of the agony. For the moment all memory passed from his mind of the shadow that he had dimly divined on Enid's path; for the moment she was to him only the radiant incarnation of the heavenly injustice. To the dying man in his bitterness she seemed a spirit, crowned with immortal roses, carrying in her hands the jewels of joy, and dancing as she went, with conquering feet, over all the laws of justice and religion. And this, this lovely radiant thing, was the undeserving Enid, while he, the correct Pharisee, who had

never browsed on husks, nor spilt the wine of a harlot's feast, was for evermore condemned into the hands of the tormentors.

Thus inventing an unjust Almighty, and casting on Him the blame of mortal anguish, Mr. Ladon passed his gloomy day in that gloomiest of cities, and in the evening returned to Ottemer, never to leave it again, as he thought to himself, in a new spasm of revolt. But by now the passion of his rebellion had worn itself down. It was but the mere shadow or shell of his old vigorous self that was carried up and over the hills to the long white house by the grey water. He was a thunder-cloud exhausted. And he met his like. For Barbara brought to receive him a meek and quiet mood, the reaction from her previous defiance of her surroundings. Thus the second meeting of the rivals was marked by unexpected peace. Lady Lisa did not choose to disturb Barbara by appearing in the drawing-room, and Mr. Ladon made no acid comment on being offered tea from a disused tea-set in an unaccustomed corner of the boudoir. He soon began to converse cheerfully enough with his son of the London visit. He gave a brief and emasculated account of his interview with Sir Julius, and hastily went on to expatiate on the bustle of happiness that prevailed round Lady Enid. Barbara had no share in the talk; she sat behind the urn, superintending the teapot with an air of conscientious self-effacement. Like most situations of acute anticipated difficulty, the present resolved itself into a dialogue of smooth and unruffled ease. Then, in the middle of the meal, arrived the post. Again it was meagre: one letter for Barbara, on which she discerned with dismay an enormous coronet the size of a tart; nothing for Mr. Ladon, and only two or three dull-looking envelopes for St. John, and a letter from Lady Malham. Having disposed of the minor matters, St. John opened his aunt's communication. As he read, he started, and soon became so evidently

absorbed in its contents that his father turned to Barbara, and endeavoured to give her a place in the conversation. His well-meant questions hummed in unconscious ears. Poor Barbara sat in a whirl of hot disaster. It was as she had always feared. With many scented protestations, Cousin Coralie triumphantly announced her delight at Barbara's invitation, and promised to come very shortly to Ottemer at the head of a little band of chosen spirits. Small wonder that Barbara was unable to devote full attention to her father-in-law's whispers, and gave him incoherent replies in a palpably distracted voice. Irritated by her lack of self-control, Mr. Ladon, seeing that she had bad news without the skill to disguise the fact, left her in peace at last. She rose abruptly from the table, and carried her confusion to the windows. Mr. Ladon followed her course with a discontented eye.

'Barbara appears to be disconcerted,' he said to his son. 'One cannot get a sensible word out of her.'

But his son was equally deaf to his words. Lifting a frowning face from his aunt's absorbing letter, St. John answered vaguely.

'Yes, father. What did you say?' He was very pale, and his voice trembled.

'A little common civility,' murmured Mr. Ladon, 'is all one asks for from one's family, and one has a right to expect it. Barbara's manners seem to have corrupted yours as well. Whatever your cousin Enid's faults, you would never find *her* jumping up and running away from the tea-table in such a preposterous way. She is a well-bred woman. I wish your wife could copy her.'

St. John Ladon took no notice of the attack on his bride. His face was full of shock and terror as he leaned towards his father, having previously turned anxiously to see that Barbara was at a safe distance. He might have spared his fears; she was busy at the window, trying to decipher hope

between the lines of her cousin's letter. A shouted conversation could hardly have disturbed her, much less, then, St. John's strained whisper as he bent towards his father's ear.

'Don't talk like that, father,' he said hoarsely—'please don't. . . . Enid . . . Enid is dead. . . .'

CHAPTER XII

MR. LADON sat alone at his writing-table, littered with books and papers. His head rested on his hand, and his eyes looked forward into a great darkness. An enormous stillness seemed to have gathered round him since the coming of the news. He was left alone in a space incalculably vast and silent. The days had gone by, bringing every detail that could be expected—the short, broken letters of Lady Malham, the long comments of Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, the arid accounts given by the newspapers. And yet, when all was told, that all was very little; there seemed nothing to tell. Enid had been perfectly as usual. After a tranquil good-night she had gone to her room, with no suggestion of worry, fatigue, anxiety. And the next morning she was dead—an overdose of chloral. No one knew why she took it; no one had any notion of any reason why she should voluntarily have taken too much. The whole affair passed into common knowledge as one of those inexplicable accidents by whose means the gods occasionally point the irony of human plans. About this sudden, inexplicable death of a young and pretty woman, on the eve of a happy marriage, there was a neat and italicized tragedy that struck the popular imagination. Every dramatic element was to be found in the catastrophe. The utter, cruel irrelevance of it all was as ghastly and as real as the utter, cruel irrelevance of the accident that intervenes to sunder Romeo and Juliet. Paralyzed with grief, the mother and the bridegroom of the dead could only sit stunned beneath the blow of destiny—

the unexplained malignity of fate that had snatched away the bride without word of warning, explanation, or farewell, in the very dawn of her fulfilment.

And Tempest Ladon found himself suddenly isolated by his knowledge in an enormous void, where his only companion was the dead. For he, and he alone, could follow her as she went down into the valley of the shadow; he, and he alone, knew whither she had gone so silently, and why. Their way was the same, but she had taken the shorter cut. He could understand the sudden agony of dread, the decision, the hurry of terror, the end. The idea had not before occurred to him in all his ponderings over his own doom; she, discovering the imminence of hers, had been swifter of mind, more vigorous of purpose. Behind a certain door in Harley Street a veiled girl had left the secret of Lady Enid's death. There was no connection left, nothing that could betray a reasoned intention in the dead. So she had come home, satisfied of her doubts, had taken her resolve, faced her lover and her world with unaltered tranquil front. And then, quickly, gently, pitilessly, she had gone out into the everlasting silence. Without a word, without a word . . . there was the horror. In the desperation of her fear she had steeled herself to relinquish everything she loved without a hint of good-bye, without the last sad consolation of a few tears and broken words at parting. The swift, incredible severance of the living from the dead was to be made incomplete by no weak hintings of purpose, by no written syllables to bridge the great gulf fixed between this world and that other world beyond. Enid was gone, leaving everything a doubt. All who loved her might think as they chose of her death. She left it unexplained, a blank and terrible land of conjecture. Cruel, cruel to deny the living the last consolation of certainty, but the cruel kindness must have been more terrible to the soul on the eve of its departure than even to those on whom

she thus hardly inflicted it. From birth to death we can none of us succeed in killing our need of human companionship and sympathy. How difficult, then, to go freely, deliberately, out into the vast cold spaces of death without a parting touch and the knowledge that somewhere on the crowded earth at least one soul is wrung for the lonely traveller starting on the long, incalculable journey.

Of all the details of Enid's death, her uncle was most appalled by this icy solitude in which she had steeled herself to depart. Alone, alone! young and happy, so very much alive, so keen, so clear-witted, so sharp of tongue—to go out alone, without a word, without a sign of shrinking, into the frozen silence of the great darkness. It seemed an agony even grotesque. He remembered her ways, her worldliness, the elaboration of her gowns, the care with which she chose her hats, the obvious labours of her maid. How utterly improbable seemed all these trappings of her character beside the elemental simplicity that gathers round the voluntarily dead. How could the well-dressed, scornful, glittering girl of a London dinner-party be of one essence with the pale ghost who had chosen her fate so quickly, and hurried like a shadow from all the shadowy pleasures in which she had spent her days? No one could conceive of Lady Enid going anywhere without gloves or hat, yet now she had gone hastily on a journey where neither hats nor gloves are wanted. The contradiction seemed irreconcilable. About the death of old or piously-given persons who die in their beds no wonder hangs. Those, again, who are young, and gently fade away, have only a mild and sentimental interest. About the end, also, of many who choose death rather than life no thought need hover but pity. They have been poor, ill, bereaved. We call them criminals, yet we recognise their wisdom that bought inestimable peace at the price of a dreary battle. But when they that die are young and full of life; when they are very human, children

of their world, clear-cut and sharp of outline; when their lives have been filled with pride, and popularity, and heart's desire, then strange indeed must the phantom be that frightens them away into the dark, and wonderfully tragic the struggle that goes on beneath that jewelled breast or that well-starched shirt, before the soul within decides of its own free will to exchange the glitter of life, light loves and wine and singing, for the long pilgrimage through dim and stony lands. Paupers and outcasts may throw themselves from bridges. We recognise the fitness of things; it is their sad right, and no one need wonder. But to imagine a well-dressed girl at the height of her successes turning from thoughts of her wedding-gown to the face of Death—that, indeed, is fiercely marvellous, so engrained are the artificialities of our conception. How to picture poison in the hand that is playing with a teacup, or death enthroned in the eyes where flowers are reflected, or eternal silence brooding upon the tongue where scandal and epigrams are dancing? The courses of the world have divorced our modern civilized life from rough primary emotion; when irrepressible passion finds violent vent, we are all surprised and shocked, as by the appearance of a naked giant at a rose-pink Watteau picnic. Others saw only malignant accident in the end of that practical, up-to-date Enid. To her uncle, sharing the secret of the dead, the tremendous mystery was that strange new figure, the grim determination, the desperate courage, the terrible quick resolve that had emerged from the charming, brilliant, frivolous personality of his niece, that finished daughter of her age. She seemed transformed into something primitive and great, running before him down an unsuspected path of escape. What it must have been to go alone like that, to go without a word, without a qualm, without a day's delay in the stern execution of her purpose! Horrible, splendid courage! horrible, splendid tragedy!

But the death of Lady Enid affected her uncle less even as horror than as example. Here had he been, an old man of experience, of knowledge, of due warning, sitting helpless in front of a difficulty that the light wit of a girl had surmounted in a moment. How bitterly he had pondered over his agonizing prospect ! And yet how simple now appeared the answer to his doubt as to what was best to be done ! An unsuspected accident, a sleep—nothing more. Was it possible that he had never guessed at this brilliant solution of his difficulty ? The thing seemed so obvious. Yet, as the bodily eye has its curious spot of blindness, so some blind space in his mental eye must have been turned towards the bright light of this revelation. He considered the question with himself. There was nothing for him to expect in life. Only the torment, the inhuman distractions of suffering, must intensify from day to day and from hour to hour, wrecking brain and strength in their course, until at the last they allowed the mangled soul to drag its shattered frame away into the outer silence. Nature had clearly issued her edict that his life must end. Therefore no accusation of weakness could lie against him for ending it sooner rather than later. He had received dismissal from his post in the army of life. The dismissal was not to come into effect for some months, or even a year ; but obviously it could make no difference if he were to anticipate its date. The decree had been received. He would act upon it himself, instead of leaving its fulfilment to the appointed executioners. Already, already he was no more than dead ; there could be no fair reason against precipitating the march of the inevitable.

On the other hand, while there was nothing against his resolve to follow Enid, there was everything in favour of the step he now so firmly contemplated. His son would be spared the misery and anxiety of watching his father irremediably die ; the life of his family would not be agitated,

complicated, burdened with the long anguish of illness. And he himself? Instead of desperate pain lying daily heavier and heavier upon his soul; instead of the ugly, humiliating details of protracted, hopeless disease; instead of the grief of causing grief to all around, and being a weight on the spirits of his household; instead of the slow advance of clawing agonies through the breathless days and everlasting, crushing nights: instead of all these there would be only a sleep—and peace. The matter needed no argument. Had there been any hope, it would have been his part to fight till the last. Since there was none—none absolutely—an early surrender was a wiser course than a desperate and preposterous resistance whose conclusion was foregone, and whose course could only add hourly to the torment of all who shared in that battle against the invulnerable, irresistible death. In warfare, protracted combat against obviously hopeless odds may be sentimentally idealized, but is known to be silly, and the action of no worthy commander. The utterly vain sacrifice of lives is fairly reprehended—as if a fishing-boat should take its stand against a fleet of ironclads. How much more, then, should the commander of Life's poor little bark be reckoned pitiful in his vain bravado, if he be obstinate in throwing away the lives of all the noble emotions that serve him, when the sea of existence is a tempest round him, and the enormous ironclads of Death and Agony and Darkness are pouring in upon his defenceless sides the raking fire of irresistible despair! Better, saner, wiser to capitulate, to make what terms we can; or, at worst, to go down calmly while we may, before our endurance, our courage, our hope, have all been struck dead at our side, and we be left alone, naked, undefended, to face the last onslaughts and the inexorable end. Before pain had worn him down to a mere hopeless, screaming thing, without consciousness in life, Mr. Ladon would take the initiative, and, not waiting to be

forced, would go down to death with all his qualities intact around him.

He smiled to himself over his simplicity in having been so slow to see the gate of escape thus thrown wide before him. Then he began to meditate details. There should be no suggestion of design, no suspicion of purpose. If Sir Julius came to hear of it, well, he had probably heard of others in like case, and would have the mournful tact to say nothing. Neither St. John nor Barbara would have any preliminary anxiety, or uncertainty after the event. Another overdose. A sad coincidence, two such in one family, within a fortnight or so of each other ; but still, only a coincidence. A fortnight's interval there must be, reluctantly thought Mr. Ladon, anxious now to be away on his path of freedom. His affairs must be settled, his will gone into, his private papers edited by fire. Of course, the estate would pass to St. John, and minor details of his testament were few and simple. Mr. Ladon thought of the Ottemer lands, and on the swift horse of fancy rode them over from end to end—the farms he was building or repairing, the plantations he had cut or made, the vast rolling moors which seemed so large a part of their owner's life. It was strange, impossible to imagine them in new hands, and their former overlord no longer in power. He tried to understand the progress of the world after he should be gone. But as each man is unconsciously the centre of his own universe, no one can conceive a world in which he does not play some conscious part, either in the flesh or in the disembodied spirit.

Mr. Ladon consoled himself by turning away from the consideration. St. John would be an excellent landlord, would no doubt introduce innovations and improvements ; but that would no longer be any concern of his father's. Then Mr. Ladon turned to Barbara, and flinched. What would she not do with the house ? What horrid disorder, what discordant colours, what nameless irreverences would

she not perpetrate in the dim quiet rooms, where order had reigned so long supreme, and every ornament was in part the ghost of some wife or sister of the Ladons, dead and dust these many years? Well, what would it matter to Tempest Ladon, in the quiet places where he would be, whether Barbara turned his mother's furniture away to the attics, and displaced the favourite chair of his dead wife? That dead wife! How keenly he remembered her after all the years! how vividly he looked forward to seeing her again in heaven! Poor Elena Ladon! how sweet she had been; how stainless and adorable; and how much water had flowed under how many bridges since that hour when her husband had seen her for the last time! He gazed lovingly at the sacred casket that enshrined her most precious relics. The memory of her carried Mr. Ladon far away from the intrusion of Barbara. In restored communion with the wife he had worshipped, he realized that whatever Barbara might do on earth, he would be consoled with the dear company of Elena again in the golden Garden away beyond the grave. His wife, his son's mother, what a beautiful angel was that to lead him out of reach of sombre thoughts! Nothing — no pain nor peril — could destroy the perfect beauty of that companion.

'And what shall I do for you?' remembered Mr. Ladon suddenly, with a bitter spasm, looking down on the cat that nestled contentedly between his knees. It was unthinkable that he should part from Lisa. How could he bear to leave her at the mercy of Barbara's malignant caprice, to imagine her wandering neglected and desolate along the corridors of Ottemer? She had come to mean so much to the lonely man, that this sudden thought of parting from the cat hurt him more than any thought of severance from his son. At least his son would be spared sad knowledge, at least his son had other companions, other consolation, but poor little Lady Lisa had nothing—nothing

but his own affection. She loved him, she depended on him, she had made him the centre of her world. And now he proposed to slink away without a word, and leave her alone in a cold or hostile crowd. He knew the nature of a cat too well to believe that when once her love and loyalty have been aroused, she will ever relax her devotion. A cat's deep friendship is far removed from the easy and flattering servility of a dog. A cat's deep friendship is as hard to acquire as that of a human being; but, once acquired, it is no less worth the winning, no less hard to alienate or abandon. He felt that the Lady Lisa would suffer in his death; and he could tell her nothing, explain nothing, but must leave her without a word. This was base coin to pay for all the fine gold of her friendship.

Taking the cat by her armpits, he lifted her from his lap and set her on a high bookcase on his right, at the level of his face. She stretched herself slowly, then assumed an Egyptian attitude, and fixed her friend with earnest blue eyes. He leaned towards her and spoke again, in his husky whisper: 'I must take care of you, Lisa, before I start. I will leave you with a good income, Lisa, and every comfort, and someone special to look after you. I will leave you your favourite chair to sleep in. But that won't make up, will it, for deserting you? And yet you would not keep me, if you could understand. We have been good friends, you and I, little Lisa, but now I am going on a journey, and I cannot take you with me. Do you think we shall meet again? I think we must. You are something more than bones and hair, you faithful heart, even as I am.'

He lifted his hand stiffly and touched her throat. It was not her way to show emotion. She was already purring violently, but at his touch she merely drew herself more erect and folded her tail more tightly across her feet.

'What are you thinking?' he asked again. 'If only one could tell what is going on behind those round eyes of

yours! I believe you will forgive me, Lisa. You have given me so much already. You have been so loyal. You have been all mine, haven't you? *You* have never cared for anyone else. Our human friends go away, or marry unpleasant women, and care no more for us; but you—you stand by me always. I am more to you than anything in the world, I think; and you have been the happiest part of my life these many days. We have been such good friends, little Lisa—such good friends. And now I must go away.' He leaned forward, and gazed up into her face. The cat fixed anxious, unblinking eyes; then she gave a very small and friendly mew of perfect assurance, put out one paw with infinite gentleness, and laid it for a moment on his cheek. He started back at the strange and charming intimacy of her action, then jerkily caught her down in his arms.

'You dear little Lisa! I think you understand,' he said, pressing her tightly to him. But Lady Lisa disliked being squeezed, and, like most human friends, retained her personal predilections even in the transports of amity. With a light effort, she jumped to the ground, and there posed hieratically, looking up at her master. Mr. Ladon sat envying the tradition of the old Scythian kings, who lie lapped in gold with their favourite horses and wives around them. 'What a brutal, barbarous thing to do!' he thought; 'but it would be the happiest for Lisa, I believe. That woman hates her, and she will be lost without me. Of course, it cannot matter, but I should have liked Lisa to be buried with me. She has cared more for me than any other being of recent years. I wonder if they would allow it? Or they might let it be done when she dies.'

He fell to contemplating his place in the mausoleum of the Ladons, a grim and sunless vault at the back of a dismal moorland church. There he would lie and rot until the Resurrection. What a strange agglomeration of

contradictory beliefs. After a problematic series of ages, a physical revival of the scattered dust; and a Judgment Day, to be followed by an eternity of joy or of shrieking agony in the everlasting fire; and, in the meantime, between death and judgment, an enormous vacant tract of æons, an Intermediate State of decay, corruption, non-existence—what? It was well that he could face his prospects, secure in the certainty that the ultimate judgment would insure his position among the eternally blessed, in payment for his sixty years or so of doctrinal excellence. To gain supernatural comfort, he took up the Prayer-Book that never lay far from his hand, and began to read the sonorous splendours of the Burial Service. What comfort to go out of life attended by so serene and noble a herald into God's presence! His lips moved reverently as he conned the calm and triumphant song that goes with the righteous to the grave. He found, as he read, that perfect trust in the magic efficacy of the service came over him like a drowsy influence. Impossible to feel doubt or fear of death or judgment, while such a charm was sung in the merciful ears of God. How it soothed, assured, established the confidence of the soul! 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'—glorious exordium, though understood by few that hear it. 'In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life.' What now remains to be said or hoped?

Luxuriating in the sense of security given by his reading, Mr. Ladon idly turned the pages with unconscious fingers. Suddenly a sentence struck his eyes, and an instant later seemed written in flaming letters across the reeling world: 'This office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands on themselves.' 'Laid violent hands on themselves . . . laid violent hands on themselves.' No service of burial . . . and without the blessing of burial by holy rites, and in hallowed ground, eternal, irremediable damnation in the

lake of brimstone that burns for ever. Mr. Ladon was far too sound an orthodox Christian to palter with the literal dogma of everlasting fire, as laid down with elemental precision at the very basis of the faith established by Peter and Paul. He had never joined the vast army of kind-hearted and heretical persons who, calling themselves Christians (and sometimes even Christian priests), attempt by explanation, by retranslation, by nice metaphysical quilllets, to soften away the immitigable flames of that eternal hell so clearly promised by all the saints to every soul that strays from the path of orthodoxy. Mr. Ladon knew it was not possible to be a selective Christian, embracing some articles of the Creed and refusing others. It must be all or nothing with a Christian anxious to escape damnation. 'This is the Catholic Faith, which Faith, except a man keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. . . .' 'And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. This is the Catholic Faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.' . . .

Oh, the glorious utterance of inspiration! How to mitigate, how to explain away these clear words that promise eternal flames to the unbeliever? The thing was plain beyond cavilling. Where the Catholic Church said fire it meant fire; where it said eternal it meant eternal; whatever the Christ may really have thought, the Catholic Church plainly insists on everlasting damnation for all the disobedient, and everyone who cannot accept that dogma in the literal and grammatical sense has no right to take the Communion, no right to burial, no right to call himself a Christian at all, except, perhaps, after the heretical and long-forgotten tradition of Jesus of Nazareth.

And to Mr. Ladon it was a matter of no doubt whatever that a geographical lake of unquenchable fire and real brimstone was somewhere prepared for all the millions of lives

that God has cast in heathen lands, or before the commencement of the Galilean ministry ; that every soul unguaranteed by the magic formulæ of Baptism must burn for ever, and that without the incantations of the Burial Service, and the blessing of ground enchanted by priestly magic, all the dead must instantly go down into the everlasting fire. And the Council of Arles had damned self-slaughter in the year 653.

Mr. Ladon, being a sound theologian, cared but little for the words of Christ. It was of no moment to him that Jesus nowhere condemns suicide, and that the early saints, so far from damning the suicide, occasionally canonized him. For Mr. Ladon Christianity was the Church, that congregation of Latin and Byzantine Bishops who reduced salvation to an exact science. Though he knew them venial, immoral, in every way unworthy of credence or respect, he yet regarded their utterances on all things invisible as final and unquestionable. He knew that, while the Pope may be a Borgia in his own life, yet his utterances in an official capacity were once Divinely inspired and eternally unquestionable for all the millions of Christian souls that they may have blessed or cursed, in all the days before King Henry was smitten with the Heaven-ordained excellencies of Anne Boleyn. Even so, while he would have invited few of the Councillors of Chalcedon or Arles into his house, yet he was willing to rely faithfully and wholly on their notions as to the prospects and possibilities of his own soul ; though a trifling turn of Fate's wheel, an indiscretion of Cyril or Athanasius in the matter of diet or clothing, might long since have turned heresy into orthodoxy, Athanasian salvation into Arian damnation. Therefore, the Council of Arles having promised damnation to the suicide, the suicide must needs be damned to all eternity, on that Council. This decree was part of the Catholic Church, which a man was to believe literally on pain of endless punishment. The situation was even beautiful in its nude simplicity. Nor could Mr. Ladon

sooth himself into any false hope that the merciful verdict of a jury or a Vicar, or any successful secrecy of proceeding, could ever blind angry God to the real facts of the case, or any service of burial thus pronounced on false pretences be of avail to stave off punishment from the suicide soul. He stared with dull eyes at the vista opening before him. On the one hand hopeless brimstone, on the other hopeless agony. He took the theologian's word as to the brimstone quite as unquestioningly as the doctor's as to the agony. And that agony must therefore be endured, uncurtailed, to its natural end, unless, indeed, some new method of relief could be devised. No longer could he contemplate the possibility of ending his own torments. But surely some means of evasion might be arrived at. He remembered that his brother-in-law, the Dean, was to arrive in about a fortnight. Mr. Ladon would endure silently till then as best he could. But he would take the Dean into his council and confidence, on strictest promise of secrecy, and see whether the agile mind of the Churchman could not devise some comfortable escape from the difficulty,

CHAPTER XIII

‘My, how this place gives me the blighted hump!’ said Cousin Coralie to her friend Miss Kitty Treves, as they sat in the large drawing-room at Ottemer.

Lady Morland was resplendent in voluminous pink tulle, and her golden transformation was crowned by an immense grey crinoline hat, caught up and garlanded with a wreath of large violet peonies, and further diversified by a tremendous scarlet osprey, like an ensanguined shaving-brush. She billowed up and down on the largest padded armchair in the room. Two novels and a newspaper were scattered on the floor, and on a stool close at hand reposed a box of caramels, a powder-puff, and a salmon-coloured parasol, whose shape was half concealed by its innumerable flounces. Cousin Coralie’s attitude was designed to express intimate and prostrate boredom. Miss Kitty Treves endeavoured to console her.

‘Oh, well, there’s only another day or two,’ she said. ‘It makes me feel as if I were in church myself.’

‘I know,’ answered Lady Morland, ‘always that same sort of starving sensation.’

With a gesture of exhausted displeasure, she powdered her expansive nose, surveyed the result favourably in a small mirror that swung from one of her beaded chains, and then once more subsided. Miss Kitty Treves was small and brilliant. Despite her brave words, she was slightly oppressed by the calm dignity of Ottemer. She sat stiff on her chair with the conscious propriety of a second-rate

maid. Not far off Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth slumbered over her knitting, and across the room Barbara was answering notes.

'Where is Mr. Lancaster?' asked Miss Treves at length.

'Oh . . . Billoo? . . . He has gone to put on his hat.'

Lady Morland produced this sentence with immense deliberation and great emphasis. Her hold on her aspirates might have been described as offensively triumphant. She had brought her cousin, Barbara's father, as well as Miss Treves, to lighten Mrs. Ladon's gloom at Ottemer. Contrary to Barbara's expectation, Mr. Ladon, when at last, with tremors, she had revealed the imminent advent of the Countess-cousin, had shown nothing worse than indifference. He was too much occupied on other matters to give much attention to the minor annoyances inflicted on him by his daughter-in-law. So Cousin Coralie, with Mr. Lancaster and Kitty, duly arrived. It can hardly be said that they were a success. Even Barbara felt their failure. Ottemer bored them, and they disgusted Ottemer. Mr. Lancaster did his best, but his unctuous manner, and his smiling humility before Mr. Ladon and the Dean, completed the annoyance of his host. For, by a malign coincidence, their visit synchronized with that of Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth and her husband. The former Blanda Ladon had developed into a stout and comfortable elderly woman of woolly appearance. She had some of her sister Melusina's beauty, but in her case it had degenerated into well-fed comeliness. Her whole life was wrapped up in her husband, and of what individuality she had ever had little remained except an inconspicuous and tranquil, but invincible, pride of birth. She knew and admitted her limitations, but never forgot that she had been born a Ladon of Ottemer. To those, therefore, whom she disapproved she presented a smooth but impenetrable wall. Nothing could prevail upon her to admit equality with the ill-connected, the shieldless, the

unquartered. She was always mild and gentle, but hard, with the incorruptible hardness known only to the soft and yielding. And, unfortunately, foremost on the list of her disapproval stood Coralie, Countess Dowager of Morland. Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth considered her an entirely impossible personage, wondered why she was there, and met all her initial advances with an unresponding amiability perfectly non-conducive of warmth. Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth considered that her behaviour showed proper dignity. Lady Morland thought it was merely dulness, so each was happy in her condemnation of the other.

Lady Morland was badly bored. She played bridge endlessly with her cousin and her train, she smoked all over the house, and dropped matches and cigarette-ends about with an absolute disregard for decency. But still she was not amused. Mr. Ladon was coldly civil; his whispered utterance annoyed her love of loud tones and gargantuan laughter. St. John she could never get on with, and the courtliness of the Dean was nothing short of intolerable. 'Barbara,' she cried at last, 'Barbara!' Her voice had a ring of indescribable commonness, heard across that calm and spacious room. Barbara rose and came towards her.

'Well, Tessa,' she answered, 'I have done my notes. Shall we go out? Is father coming?'

Barbara was, of course, in deep mourning. She had resisted vainly the edict that sent her into black; but even her husband had sided against her, and she had given way for his sake, though feeling that life held little good if she was to be deprived of colour. Both she and Cousin Coralie considered that she looked truly horrible and depressing in black. As a matter of fact, she was even more beautiful than ever. The pallor of her complexion, the radiance of her hair, the insolent suavity of her conscious carriage, were all intensified by the darkness of her garments. As she

moved across the room, never had she seemed more perfectly graceful.

Cousin Coralie surged out of her chair with ponderous alacrity, like a cow arising from its bath. Her draperies splashed around her and sustained the simile.

'Well,' she said, 'you *are* a dowd, my poor Barbara! Yes, we'll go out of doors. Anything to get out of this dead-alive room. Kitwink and me have had no end of a job to keep ourselves awake. As for that old Mommer over there, she shuts her eyes at us whenever we speak to her.'

It will be noticed that Cousin Coralie was not an adept in the finer shades of good behaviour. Barbara thanked Heaven that her face was so inexpressive that she could conceal the acute disgust with which Lady Morland's manners inspired her hostess. As for Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, behind closed eyes she gently meditated on the disasters of having no family and no sort of breeding. It was no more than could be expected of a Wimbush, she decided, and firmly refused to accord Lady Morland the distinction of her further consideration.

Barbara led the way. Lady Morland paused only to pick up the caramel-box.

'Kitwinkle,' she said, 'you carry my parasol, there's a bird.' Then she continued, her utterance impeded by a bulging sweetmeat: 'Oh, and the cigarettes, angel.'

She dragged herself heavily after her cousin, while Miss Treves obediently followed with the baggage. Lady Morland, still chewing the caramel noisily, selected another to throw at Lady Lisa, who happened to be seated on a table eating an orchid. With a glare of cold contempt Lisa turned, descended from the table with an air of insulted majesty, and retired beneath a chair.

'Even the cat's a frump,' moaned poor Lady Morland, disappointed of her comic effect.

'Come,' said Barbara shortly.

The women went out upon the slope of lawn leading down towards the lake. The day, as usual, was cool and grey; the water showed steely in the cheerless light. Lady Morland, who loved colour and dash, shuddered again. A stage setting of Venice was her ideal. Suddenly she stopped under the windows, and, lifting her golden head, called twice at the top of her voice for Billoo: 'Biloo! . . . Biloo!' rang her strident scream. Disconcerted ducks, accustomed to the immemorial stillness, rose with quacks of remonstrance and flew away. For a moment silence fell, a silence that was never going to end, felt Barbara. How could she have failed to foresee the intense annoyance that the imagined comfort of her cousin's company would prove to be, in the changed, uncongenial atmosphere of Ottemer! Then a window of the drawing-room opened, and Mr. Lancaster emerged, glossy and splendid as ever, smiling his best pulpit smile, and rubbing his hands one over the other. Every time that he was called Billoo by a Countess—even a Dowager-Countess—his soul was thrilled with joy in contemplation of its brilliant social position. Nor was his Countess-cousin niggard of that pleasure. Her talent for nicknames was great, and justly admired by her friends. Miss Treves, as we have seen, was Kitwink, with variations; Mr. Lancaster was Billoo; only for stately Barbara was Lady Morland unable to summon up courage to compile any intimate appellation. She herself was always Tessa—an abbreviation, of course, for Contessa—by whose assiduous use she kept the glories of her matrimonial prowess well to the foreground of the world's memory.

'Wherever have you been, Biloo?' demanded his cousin, while Barbara walked before them down to the water's edge.

'Waiting for you, Contessina, of course,' replied Mr. Lancaster with beaming smiles and a fruity British accent.

Lady Morland, delighted at the diminutive, frisked youthfully.

‘What a mercy it is I brought you with me to this God-forsaken wilderness, Billoo!’ she exclaimed. ‘Kitty and me would have been half bored off our heads else. Barbara, Barbara, don’t fall into that nasty water.’

Barbara made no reply. She was infinitely bored and disgusted by every word that her cousin uttered; and she had neither the manners nor the wish to conceal the fact. Every sentence of Cousin Coralie aroused in her a cold and passionate antagonism. As Lady Morland criticised and condemned, the hills, the lake, the house of Ottemer itself, became sympathetic to Barbara. She found herself at last a partisan of the very country in which she had long felt herself so lonely and misplaced.

And Tempest Ladon, for his part, found that the entirely detestable presence of the Countess-cousin was having an unexpected effect upon his son’s wife. She was becoming unaccountably gentler, more harmonious, in every way less offensive to the traditions of Ottemer. But, though out of evil good was coming, yet the evil of Lady Morland’s company was a very immediate nuisance, and its benefits comparatively remote.

Barbara looked up at last from the bank.

‘Where do you want to go?’ she coldly inquired. ‘It’s not a peculiarly pleasant day for a walk.’

‘Lord, no!’ groaned Contessa shrilly, while her many perfumes whirled about her like cyclones in the cold, quiet air. ‘But I felt I must get out of that great barrack somehow. Ugh! those chilly passages, full of draughts! What I like is something homely—a place where one can put one’s feet up and drop one’s things about comfortably. This place of yours makes me feel as if I was in a reformatory. Have another caramel, Kitwink . . . and you, Billoo?’

'I am sorry you dislike my home so much,' said Barbara distantly, as her cousin fell noisily to chewing an immense caramel. 'I ought to have known that you could never feel comfortable here.'

'Most magnificent, I am sure, Barbara,' began her father with humble unction.

Cousin Coralie flapped her arms as one that demands attention.

'Mum—mumm—mum,' she gurgled wildly, struggling with the caramel.

Mr. Lancaster obsequiously broke off, and after a brief convulsion Lady Morland found unimpeded speech.

'At home here!' she squawked. 'You might as well talk about feeling at home in a vault at Kensal Green. The place is like a tomb. The only people who are really at home here are those awful old Roman biddies cut in marble all along the big passage. It gives Kitwink and I the creeps only to walk along it after dark. Yah, that big passage!'

'The Long Corridor, I suppose you mean,' murmured Barbara with a suppressing manner.

Her father had discernment to see that Contessa's strictures were unwelcome. He opened his abundant vials of oil upon the troubled waters.

'Yes, the Long Corridor,' he annotated. 'A fine name for a fine piece of architecture, I am sure. Contessina does not realize that those statues are genuine antiques of great value and beauty, no doubt. A most interesting series, undoubtedly, Barbara; but you can understand that dear Contessina, with her sprightly mind, is—may I venture—ill-attuned to such austere works of art. On a dull day, for instance, they positively chill her brightness. To see Contessina in the Long Corridor is—you will permit me—like watching a butterfly flitting among the tombs.'

The butterfly in question flitted heavily in Mr. Lancaster's direction, and whacked him with the lid of the caramel box.

Under the Countess's love-taps he assumed the air of a tickled tabby. His manner was filled with purrings. Miss Treves giggled viciously.

'A butterfly of fourteen stone,' she observed.

'Now there you go, Twankle,' cried Lady Morland, turning wrathfully, 'always saying the nasty things. Nobody would ever think what I weigh if you didn't go about hinting and sneering in that beastly sarcastic manner. Billoo, you don't call me embonpoint, do you?'

No spelling can render the epithet as Lady Morland produced it, but Mr. Lancaster was skilled in Anglo-French, and understood.

'Miss Kitty is jealous,' he purred. 'She would give her eyes to be just such another plump little fairy as my Contessina.'

Miss Treves tossed her head despitefully; but Lady Morland beamed, and once more rewarded her cousin with a pat.

'You bad thing!' she cried; 'oh, you awful bad thing! I declare you are trying to flirt with me. And you a clergyman, and me a widow!'

The accusation of flirting with a Countess-Dowager was milk and honey to Mr. Lancaster. A saponaceous gaiety inspired him.

'You must not tempt poor St. Antony,' he cooed, and Contessa shrieked again with mirthful joy, till the quiet echoes of the lake rose up on every side, and protested in pallid reflections of her screeches.

The moment was insufferable to Barbara, who realized with redoubled keenness how far she had advanced since the days in which such gambollings had been found tolerable or even inspiriting.

'What a noise you people are making!' she remarked.

'Well, and musn't one open one's mouth in this God-forgotten hole?' screamed Lady Morland in self-defence. 'My,

how you've changed since you came here, Barbara! You used to be such a one for a little quiet jolliness, and now you look as sour as vinegar if one so much as smiles. For the Lord's sake, don't get like those dreary people indoors. One would think every one of them was petri—petrified like those Johnnies in the Long Passage.'

'I was afraid you would not get on with my friends,' said Barbara bitterly and rudely. But both bitterness and rudeness escaped Cousin Coralie.

'I am glad you knew your poor old Tessa so well. To think of me getting on with your husband's people! Thank mercy, I'm a living woman and a Londoner. I haven't lived on pokers all my life, like that old Lady Malham of yours, though I *am* a lady of title and as good as she is any day. As for your father-in-law and the Dean, they are every bit as bad, so soapy and mincing, and never an atom of fun out of either of them. Goodness! one mightn't be in the same house with them, for all the notice they take of one when one wants a little cheerful conversation. Polite? Oh, I grant you, yes, but so stiff and unhomey. It makes me feel quite shy to be with them. What *I* like is—people who are friendly and chatty. Why, that woolly old aunt of yours, that Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, she—well, she speaks to me as if I was nobody in particular,' concluded the Countess-Dowager of Morland with an air of righteous aggrievance.

'Now, do you think so?' said Mr. Lancaster hastily. 'Personally, I have found Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth most affable and pleasant. I think I may venture to say that I have made great friends with Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth.'

The Dean's wife was sacred to Mr. Lancaster, as being both a Dean's wife and a Marchioness's sister. He would not admit having failed to win her heart, though Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth obviously considered him a perfectly inconsiderable and unnecessary phenomenon.

'I can't make them out, either,' continued Lady Morland, fairly embarked on the discussion of her wrongs. 'Why can't they be more friendly? Sometimes it almost seems as if they didn't want me there at all. And yet, goodness knows, they ought to be only too proud and glad to have a woman like me in the house. But even their politeness seems rude, somehow. Un-English I call it; no heartiness about it. Your husband bows and smiles at me, Barbara, just like an Italian organ-grinder. I have never been accustomed to that sort of thing.'

Barbara's endurance frankly gave out. 'Oh, do drop it!' she said. 'If you don't like my people, you'll either have to go away or put up with them. I'm not going to alter them for you. And we won't discuss my husband.'

'Well, there's nothing to lose your hair about, anyway. I only say his manners aren't English.'

'Considering his mother was an Italian, that is not to be wondered at.'

'Ah, that accounts for it. He doesn't look as if even his father had been English. I never saw father and son less alike. And there isn't one of the pictures either that he favours. He is an Italian out and out, just his mother's son. Who *was* his mother, by the way?' loftily inquired Lady Morland, who had an idea that the question implied nobility in the inquirer.

'She was a daughter of the Marchese of Montevercchio,' replied Barbara.

'Ah, they are all Counts and Marquises over there,' answered the Countess of Morland, with an air of happy superiority—'some pauper, I suppose, without a gown to her back. . . . Ah . . . yah!' she added, yawning convulsively. 'What shall we do next? I have eaten all that box of caramels, Billoo, and quarrelled with Barbara, and I was never so bored in my life before. You don't *really* like this place, Barbara, do you, you poor dear thing?'

'I suppose it is an acquired taste,' answered Barbara, feeling a momentary thrill of sympathy for the stern glories of Ottemer. 'I belong to it now, you see, so I am bound to be fond of it.'

Cousin Coralie looked at the long towering white façade, with its balustrade at the top, and the stone urns ranged along the parapet. The house stared down upon her with blank dislike.

'Lor!' she said in earnest tones, 'you poor, poor soul! And you who have lived at Surbiton with me. Have you any neighbours, at least, to come and cheer you up?'

'Not many people have come yet. I suppose we are in mourning,' replied Barbara. 'And my father-in-law has lived alone for many years, so that we have no friends in the country exactly.'

'Who is the biggest boss of the neighbourhood?' asked Cousin Coralie.

'Oh, I think this is about the most important house in our part of the county,' replied her cousin, who by now had well grasped the importance accorded to her in the district, and at the moment viewed her position with satisfaction.

Lady Morland snorted. 'No titles at all?' she exclaimed. 'Lord, what a God-forgotten hole! Not so much as a Baronet, Barbara? Well, well, what a pack of old frumps they must be about here! You want a woman of my position to come among you and wake you up a bit. What happens? Do they have garden-parties, or what?'

'I should think something of the kind,' answered Barbara. 'I can't say yet.'

'What a holy dissipation!' cried Lady Morland. 'I know the kind of thing: buns and lemonade in the back-ground, and the lawn black with curates. Curates are like beetles. If one puts down a saucer of something in the kitchen, all the black beetles in the neighbourhood come in

swarms. And one has to send out cards for a garden-party to find out how many curates there are in the country. They emerge from all kinds of unsuspected places, like the beetles, until the whole place is black with them. Heaven save me from your garden-parties! But I should like to see some of the old cats you have about here. Do they wear crinolines, Barbara?’

Barbara took no notice. The party had strolled along the shore of the water. Now they had reached the end of the house, and turned along the path leading inland. Slowly they passed the rows of unwinking windows, and moved towards the shallow strip of lawn which framed the further face of Ottemer, along which rolled up into view from left to right the broad gravel expanse of the drive. Their position commanded a perfect sight of the road, except where the angle and long front of the house blocked the portion immediately before it from their eyes. Suddenly Miss Treves, who had vainly been trying to converse with Mr. Lancaster in the intervals of his attention to the Countess-cousin, lifted her head and broke off her murmured remarks.

‘I hear something,’ she ejaculated.

‘No!’ cried Cousin Coralie with incredulity.

But Miss Treves was right. In the uncanny silence a noise was clearly to be heard, and, as it grew louder, was perceived to be that of a carriage rolling more or less rapidly towards the house. Lady Morland palpitated with excitement. Here, at last, was something to be done—a little amusement to be sucked from her dreary visit.

‘Well,’ she cried, twinkling with anticipation, ‘talk of the devil— Here *is* one of the frumps coming to see you. Let’s have her in, Barbara dearest. I’ll bet we’ll astonish the old Mommer a bit. Is my hat well on one side, Kit-wankle? Oh lor! this will be fun! I’ll tell her how glad I am to meet her, because I am collecting fossils. It will

be something for the poor old soul to talk about, too, having met me. Oh, only look !' concluded Lady Morland in a penetrating screech, which, as poor Barbara hotly blushed to feel, must be clearly audible to the approaching visitor.

For by now a stately conveyance was rolling majestically into sight from the further side of the drive. Two stalwart black horses, under the guidance of a stout and venerable coachman, were drawing a landau that resembled an enormous yellow ark. Within its deep recesses sat a solitary figure obscured beneath a black parasol. A moment later and the parasol was furled, revealing a black mushroom hat and a portly presence clad in a beaded satin dolman—none other, in short, than Mrs. Bolpett of that ilk. They had only a fragmentary glimpse of her before the carriage was cut off from sight by the angle of the house.

Cousin Coralie screeched once more with irrepressible delight.

'Give me a cigarette—quick, quick, Kitwankle!' she exclaimed. 'We'll make old granny sit up. Now a match, Billoo. Look sharp!'

In another instant she was puffing vigorously, with as great an air of wicked worldliness as she could muster. The landau had stopped before the door, and was still occluded by the house and its colonnade.

Barbara was in an agony. Mrs. Bolpett she knew by sight and reputation, having seen her at church. What horrible catastrophes would result from the introduction to Cousin Coralie? Lady Morland was absolutely certain to insult her in some unmistakable and studiously offensive way; nor, in the most favourable circumstances, were the two women of a nature to meet harmoniously. At any cost Barbara felt that she must save Mrs. Bolpett and herself from the horror of being outraged by Cousin Coralie's impossible ways. How to prevent the meeting became an instant question. She stood in a terrified trance, longing

to do something, but pitifully uncertain what steps should be taken. Could she run to meet the visitor and dexterously turn her steps into another path? But Cousin Coralie would undoubtedly follow close upon her heels, and the situation would only be made worse. Bitterly did Barbara then envy the women who had tact and experience in dealing with such emergencies. She herself stood paralyzed, awaiting every instant the emergence upon the lawn of that ominous beaded figure. It was with a sudden spasm of terror that at last she saw the butler advancing across the grass. But no beaded figure followed.

Barclay presented Mrs. Ladon with a silver salver on which a card was lying in state. Barbara took it up, and read, 'Mrs. Bolpett of Bolpetts.' Silence fell.

Cousin Coralie drew ponderously near on tiptoe, read the card over Barbara's shoulder, and suddenly squalled with laughter. The butler humbly attempted to insert a question into an interval of her merriment.

'Are you at home, 'm?' he succeeded at last in inquiring of Barbara, during a fragmentary instant of calm.

But Lady Morland was off again, and an answer became impossible. Barbara stood with the card in her hand, thanking Heaven for the loophole offered her.

'Oh, oh!' sobbed Lady Morland. 'Hold me up, Kit-wankle—hold me up! What a heavenly, heavenly name! Show her in, whatever your name is; show her out, I mean—show her out here at once. We will receive Mrs. Bolpett of Bolpetts, and give her something to talk about for the rest of her life. Oh, Billoo, I am as weak as a kitten with laughing so much! Mrs. Bolpett—and of Bolpetts, too! Oh, how amusin', how cruelly amusin'! Laugh, Barbara, laugh, and don't lose a minute in sending for the dear old girl in the dolman.'

The butler still stood at pause awaiting his answer.

'Not at home,' said Barbara firmly.

He turned and retired to the house. Lady Morland remained with her mouth open, in a stupor of astonished anguish, even incapable of protest.

'Not at home?' she murmured feebly, as soon as the power of utterance came back.

Barbara looked at her with triumph. Suddenly the carriage wheels were heard once more. Awakening too late to her position, Barbara turned to flee. Too late! The yellow ark swept rapidly into view, and rolled along within a dozen yards of the lawn where they stood. Barbara stood planted in full view of the rejected visitor. Mrs. Bolpett fixed her with a stern and penetrating glare. The situation was irremediable, immitigable in its catastrophic rudeness. The carriage passed out of sight among the woods to the right, leaving Mrs. Ladon in a state of incoherent, speechless confusion.

'Mercy! what a float-face!' ejaculated Miss Treves, who had once had a flirtation with a man from Balliol, and was justifiably tenacious of the proud memory.

Mr. Lancaster conceived it wiser to say nothing. By laughing he gathered that he would offend his daughter, for whom, since she had married this spacious palace, he had cultivated a respect almost as humble as if she had achieved a title. On the other hand, to express regret at the disaster would be to damp the merriment of his Countess-cousin, a step by no means to be contemplated. Accordingly the tactful divine preserved a harmless silence.

But Cousin Coralie rode in triumph over the vanquished. 'Serve you jolly well right!' she trumpeted, with an eldritch scream of laughter.

And Barbara found no word to say, but turned hastily and went into the house, leaving her trio of guests on the lawn to amuse themselves as best they might. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

THOUGH Mr. Ladon had looked forward with so much impatience to the arrival of the Dean and Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, he had not yet found an opportunity for putting his theological difficulties before his brother-in-law. The Dean was not a man in whom even an effusively confidential person would have found it easy to enter upon intimately private topics. Not that the Dean was forbidding in manner nor uncharitable of mind. On the contrary, a kinder or more sympathetic character could hardly have been found. In fact, it was the very catholicity of his goodwill that deterred a man so self-contained and proud as Mr. Ladon from claiming even half an hour's monopoly of the Churchman's indefatigable kindness.

Philip Augustus Gordon-Wentworth was a man in whom life-long learning had only succeeded in implanting an indestructible belief that man is essentially good and God essentially just. He made a conspicuous figure in his Church, offering few pronouncements of opinion, but contriving to fill his life, public and private, with a pervading atmosphere of kindly tolerance. To men and women alike he appeared always as a friend, on whose unwearied benevolence and sympathy they might unreservedly rely; his gift of sympathy lay less in his actual words than in the sure confidence inspired by his habit of mind, determined always to judge humanity by its highest moments, and not by its lowest. In good works and pure thoughts he found the value of humanity; not in that doctrinal rectitude on

which alone the Church depends for salvation of its members. No strong suspicion of heresy, however, hung about him, for dogmatic expositions he successfully avoided, and was content to win the affection of his world by unflinching devotion to the needs and fears of all with whom he came in contact. Not even his Bishop could escape the radiance shed by his beneficent life, but owned him a soul of the highest value and charm.

In appearance the Dean was picturesque and polished, recalling the urbane and stately prelates of a bygone day. Sprung of good stock (being the grandson of Admiral Sir Frederick Wentworth and of Anne his wife, an Elliot of Kellynch), he carried to perfection the suave magnificence of his traditions. His speech was courtly and well-rounded, his accents full of a gracious and deliberate pomp that spoke of a time when life was not yet defiled with meannesses or hurry. Quite unconsciously, the Dean surrounded himself with an atmosphere of serene dignity that alone prevented his kind heart from being altogether swamped by the onslaughts of the unhappy seeking consolation. Before such a man it was impossible to be peevish and whining, impossible to be clamorous and ill-bred in the insistence of one's claims to attention. Sorrows in his calm presence sank to their true proportions, and all who appealed to him for comfort found that their own wounded self-respect was best served by scrupulous respect for him. He, for his part, was a man of subtle instincts, but not of subtle mind. It was enough for him to love and heal, though rarely analyzing the reasons why he was able to love and heal. Life had always treated him well, and of his prosperity he made a rich return to the world. Tempest Ladon, not having seen him for very many years, found no difficulty in finding him a friend ready to hand. As for Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, she from her fireside adored her husband, uncritically, indeed, but with the housewifely zeal of the

ideal prelate's wife. She was one of the many women to whom creature comforts are the best possible sign of an inward and spiritual devotion ; consequently, she was satisfied in superintending his blankets, and in seeing that he changed his wet boots, while leaving undisputed possession of his soul to all the innumerable clamouring interests of his flock. The arrangement perfectly pleased her husband, who was thus left undisturbed to go his ways. Of the two, each, in some strange way, was the complement of the other, and the union was found to be ideal by all the matrons of the Close.

The Dean had not been at Ottemer since he had married Blanda Ladon, many years before. Now he found sad changes in his host, and a mysterious air of strain and tragedy pervading the great house. Neither Tempest, St. John, nor Barbara seemed happy as they should be. The Dean hoped that he might find some remedy for their disease. He took pains to improve Barbara's acquaintance, but she, worried by events, had little time to notice his overtures, and was only repelled by the elaborate grace of his manners. He then turned his attention to Cousin Coralie, whose presence seemed to him entirely inexplicable and inharmonious. With infinite pains did he try to ascertain her sympathies, but after a while was forced to admit himself baffled. Cousin Coralie suspected insult beneath all forms of courtesy, and, subjected to the Dean's gracious expressions, became uncomfortable, awkward, and eventually insolent. He, postulating in everyone good manners either of the heart or of the training, was, in his turn, repelled by the crude brutality of her rudeness, and ceased from further efforts in her direction. Nor were the other strangers more congenial to him. Miss Treves did not reward effort, and even the Dean's wide tolerance flagged before the oily sycophancy of the Rev. Grosvenor Lancaster.

'A truly remarkable woman,' the Dean was remarking to

his brother-in-law. He was sitting in the window of Mr. Ladon's room and looking out on to the lawn, where Cousin Coralie, having obtained a fresh box of caramels, was now amusing herself by throwing them from a few yards' distance into Billoo's widely-opened mouth, with wild screams of hilarity whether she hit or missed. Mr. Ladon made no answer. He was in pain that day, anxious to put his question to the Dean, yet reluctant to have it answered and done with.

'A woman quite *sui generis*, I should imagine,' continued the Dean. 'A very good-natured, kind-hearted person, with a delightful fund of animal spirits. It is a great joy to meet people who are not ashamed to enjoy life openly in their own harmless way. She has now succeeded in throwing a caramel into Mr. Lancaster's mouth for the third successive time, and her pleasure knows no bounds. I could wish that Blanda were less intolerant on her account.'

'Blanda doesn't like her, then?' sneered Mr. Ladon. 'You really surprise me.'

'My dear Blanda is perhaps a little inclined, as possibly I am myself at times, to overrate the importance of birth and breeding. She cannot conceive that a woman of an entirely different type and training from her own may well be quite as kind-hearted and valuable as herself. It is not always easy to escape from such prejudices. Indeed, I must confess that, though I am prepared to like Lady Morland sincerely myself, I have not yet altogether succeeded in doing so. A certain roughness there is by which I am old-fashioned enough to be repelled. It is a great fault to be so critical. One loses so much joy out of life and one's fellow-creatures.'

'A disgusting, impossible woman!' said Mr. Ladon suddenly. 'One of Barbara's relations. She is the fine flower of the family into which my son has married.'

'It is no bad thing to be connected with a kindly, honest

nature, even though perhaps it may take a younger generation than mine to appreciate her qualities at their proper value. I am afraid, Tempest, neither you nor I are quite qualified to enjoy such recent developments of character as much as our juniors may and do.'

'Perhaps not. In any case, we have to put up with her. Barbara insisted on inviting her and all her troop of third-rate friends.'

'Barbara is a wonderfully loyal and charming girl,' continued the Dean. 'I think St. John has been truly wise and fortunate in winning her. Naturally, Tempest, the arrangement presents difficulties just at first, but one can have no doubt that the happiness of all concerned is perfectly safe in the hands of such a really kind and noble nature as hers. Nothing could give a better sign of her character than the loyalty which prompts her not to abandon her relations.'

'You don't realize, Philip, that she and the whole pack are proud of that woman who is now gorging caramels on my lawn. They are proud of her, Philip—proud of her!'

'No, no, no,' remonstrated the Dean. 'Fond of her I am sure they are, as she deserves, but proud of her—no, no!—believe me, no!'

'Well, what do you think of Barbara's father?'

'I am certain that he is a most honest and hard-working clergyman. I am afraid he does not find me sympathetic, however. His manner with me is stilted and unfortunately servile. I am unable to put him at his ease; the whole difficulty evidently arises through my fault. He is really at his best when amusing Lady Morland. He likes her, and is happy with her. I could wish that I were better gifted for making people happy.'

'Your business to make them good, Philip,' suggested Mr. Ladon, 'not happy.'

'The surest way of making people good is to make them

happy, I am certain, Tempest. I cannot believe it is possible to be happy without becoming also good. Happiness is but unformulated gratitude; and all goodness is but gratitude for our happiness, made effectual in our lives by handing happiness on to others.'

Mr. Ladon, however, was in no mood for disquisitions on happiness. The very word seemed to him to be spelt in some remote and foreign language, very far away from his understanding. This was not the moment to attack the Dean on the vital question, and charitable verdicts on Cousin Coralie were as far from her host's taste as wishes for her happiness. With a determined effort to walk like a sane and sober man, he left the Dean, and went out into the passage. Thence he made his way to the great staircase, and thence again, carefully clinging to the banisters, down into the hall below. At the end of the broad corridor, lined with the watching marble Emperors and Empresses, lay the Silver Room, whence he wished to rescue the Lady Lisa, whom for some hours he had missed; but on his way Mr. Ladon came suddenly on his daughter-in-law. Barbara was kneeling on a big oak chair, looking up into the impassive face of the first Blanda Ladon, as immovably unfriendly as her gentle descendant now slumbering so peacefully over her knitting. As she heard the unsteady footsteps coming down the corridor, Barbara rose to her feet and met the eyes of her father-in-law. She was looking very frail now, very weary, very worn. Her black gown served to throw into relief the exaggerated pallor of her face; and about her pose, as she stood, there was an impression of intense fatigue, of collapse beneath a burden too heavy to be borne. She had never so much appealed to him as now that her apparent weakness cried for comfort to his apparent strength. For a moment he knew something of the oppression beneath which her life was labouring, felt himself cruel and unjust in his attitude towards her. In an

instant his grudging dislike of her, the morbid jealousy in which his sufferings had fixed him, gave way to a simpler, kinder feeling. He put out his poor stiff arm and took her hand.

'You are tired, Barbara,' he whispered.

She gave a sigh.

'Oh, tired, tired,' she said. She was ready to say more, but stopped suddenly, foreseeing the usual bitter snub. He marked the sudden break of her sentence, and, with a spasm of self-reproach, realized all that it implied. How harsh he must have been to her—how unjustly harsh! Why should he, being so unhappy, have therefore set himself to grudge the happiness of the young? Many of the biting things he had said to Barbara had been said, as cruel things so often are, in an obstinate superstition that their victim could not mark their full significance. Now he understood how she must have winced before his words, how she must have suffered from all the keen darts which, in the anguish of his own mood, he had so persistently launched in her direction. The fire of hostility died down within him.

'Poor Barbara!' he murmured as softly as he might, 'you have been doing too much. Wouldn't you go to your room and rest? Tea shall be sent up, and we will look after your guests for you.'

Barbara stared at the unaccustomed friendliness. She searched the sentence for a sneer, and could find none. Then her eyes filled.

'I am sorry to be so stupid,' she said in a low voice. 'I hope there is thunder in the air to account for it. Entertaining Cousin Coralie is rather heavy work after awhile.'

A sudden rush of sympathy swept away all barriers between them. Tempest was eager to accept her overture.

'Perhaps she might be induced to shorten her visit,' he

ventured, not with any unfriendly suggestion, but merely as one in sympathy with Barbara. At his new note of fellow-feeling her calm broke.

'Oh, if only, *only!*' she cried ardently. 'Oh, I cannot think why ever I asked her to come. I might have known that she would jar, and be all wrong in this house. Mr. Ladon, I am sorry—you must have hated it so.'

Balaam, when his ass protested, cannot have been more astounded than was Mr. Ladon at hearing such unimpeachable sentiments proceeding from the mouth of a daughter-in-law in whom he had long schooled himself to believe that there lurked not the faintest germs of any right feeling whatever.

'My dear Barbara,' he answered, 'we all make mistakes at times. And people who are very nice in one place are not always quite as nice in another. I dare say Lady Morland and her friends will go away soon, and then we shall have you to ourselves again. I hardly feel to have got to know you yet, my daughter-in-law. We must see more of each other and make friends.'

If the sight of her tired white face had first set her old enemy in the way of reconciliation, Barbara herself was not slow to begin making excuses for him. With the generous emotion of the young she noticed his age, the decay of his strength; she found herself gazing straight into the fact of his intense and bitter loneliness—a loneliness of which she herself was, as it were, the very incarnation. What wonder, then, that he should suffer? and what wonder, too, that he should visit his sufferings on her through whom they came? In a flash she remembered her aggravating exaggerations of flippancy, her deliberate pertnesses, the large and small annoyances that she had studiously manufactured for his discomfiture. She, too, had been abominably unfeeling. Now she would hail joyfully the peace he offered, and in future try to make their difficult situation more possible.

'How kind you are to me!' she said . . . 'so much kinder to me than I deserve. Do let me do more things for you in future. Shall I fetch you the cat? She is in the drawing-room.'

To hear Lisa called the cat, and the Silver Room described as the drawing-room, were two small but distinct chills to the warmth of Mr. Ladon's sympathy. However, he diligently gave Barbara credit for her good intentions, and, realizing the sacrifice she offered, gave her abundant thanks, though declining her services. At last he dismissed her to rest in her room, and continued his way towards the Silver Room, filled with very different feelings from those which had animated him two hours before, while he was being badgered through lunch by the idiotic prattle of Lady Morland, whose acrid laughter seemed to rend his brain to tatters. Arrived in the Silver Room, he took the Lady Lisa on his knees, fell to stroking her ears and expounding matters in general. The Lady Lisa liked having her ears caressed, as much by confidences as by dexterous fingers. She purred consumedly at the relaxed mood of her master, on whose spirits for some time she had noticed a disastrous cloud.

'She called you the cat, my dear,' whispered Mr. Ladon, 'which, of course, was not as it should be; but she meant well, and I think before long you will have to make friends with her. We were mistaken about her, you and I. She is not so bad as we thought. We have done too much to make her unhappy, Lisa, just because we were cross and in pain. If you were in a trap, Lisa, suffering horribly in one of those gin-traps that the keepers used to put about the place till I forbade them, do you think you would want to bite and scratch everybody that came near, so as to make them suffer a little, too? That is what we reasonable human beings are always inclined to do. And here have I been trying to bite that poor girl upstairs, instead of working

to get my own soul out of the trap. The way out is not so easy as it looks, Lisa, because I am afraid of a worse trap outside the other, if I succeed in escaping; but we will consult my brother-in-law to-night, and see what he says. You like my brother-in-law, Lisa, don't you? He is quiet and well bred and polite, you think, and people of that sort please you. Well, we will put our difficulty before him, and see what suggestion he has to make. For we cannot stay in the trap, little Lisa—we cannot stay there. The teeth have eased off our bones for to-day, but there is no telling how soon they may close in upon us again, worse than before, and for longer. Close in again they must, every day biting harder and closer, every day more and more difficult to hold off even for half an hour, until at last they hold us day and night, and crush us to death in the end. Mustn't we get out of that trap, Lisa—mustn't we get out of it as best we can? And yet, if we take the obvious way, we shall go straight into everlasting fire. Everlasting fire is worse than a few months of even this horrible trap, Lisa. Think of it, brown rabbit, if you can. One day, when your soul has grown and grown, you will have to face the thought——'

He paused, seeing himself on the brink of a heresy, in attributing to an animal even the future possibility of a soul. But, with the praiseworthy inconsistency of the kindly Christian, he was readier to risk heterodoxy in the cause of a friend than in his own. He refused to consider the fact that neither Scripture nor Fathers show any real concern or affection for animals, nor give the faintest hint of a future for them. Cost what it might, he must believe in some sort of permanence for all forms of life, since in essence they are all identical with the human.

As for the Lady Lisa, she was thoroughly comfortable and half asleep. She heard a friendly murmur floating round her, and was not inclined to puzzle over its meaning.

She lent the inattentive and serene ear, which sometimes makes a selfish human friend so much easier to confide in than one more eager, who will interrupt one's confidence with questions, and generally show an interrogative rather than a merely receptive spirit. The most satisfactory form of consolation is often that which simply listens, and gives us solace by enduring the pent-up flow of our griefs without more effort than the formal courtesy of allowing them to pour forth unchecked. In many sorrows we only want to talk, and not to listen.

'Think of it—think of it, Lisa,' said Mr. Ladon, while Lady Lisa politely purred and wrinkled up her smutty Roman nose. 'Try to imagine that a snail is crawling slowly, slowly over the floor. It will take an hour to get here from the door. Try to imagine all the many, many million centuries that snail would have to crawl before it reached the sun—millions after millions of trailing, leaden years dragging slowly on into the remotest distance. And yet, when all those ages have run out, and the snail has reached the sun, think that that whole awful gulf of time is nothing, Lisa—nothing in the eternity of the damned. The souls in everlasting fire will not be nearer the end of their agony by so much as one flashing second of time. For, in the face of eternity, there is no such thing as time. Time is only our artificial method of dividing life, and there is no end ever—*ever*, to the torment of the condemned. That is what a great preacher told me once, Lisa, and all Christians must believe it, or else go down into the very fire whose existence they pretend to disbelieve. Many people nowadays are soft and feeble, and dare to dispute that doctrine and whittle it away. But they are no true Christians, for true Christianity does not admit a doubt on the point. It is certain, certain; it is the foundation of our faith. And we are true Christians; we will not run any risk of that unquenchable fire, either by trying to explain it

away, or by walking along the path of damnation in our hurry to get out of the trap. And yet the trap is very horrible, Lisa; we will ask the Dean if there is no safe way to escape from it.'

Lady Lisa heard the whispering voice above her head growing deeper yet huskier in its tones. She was sensitive to notes of sound. She stopped purring, and turned up an anxious, inquiring face to his. But he was very far away, and took no notice.

'There must be some way out,' he murmured; 'some way there must be, or else it would be too monstrously unjust. Unless I can find some safe way out, the horror of it all will drive me mad. . . . And that girl—that girl walks happily through life, and the worst worries she has come from a few cross words and a little thunder in the air. Everything else in the world she has on her side. A husband who worships her, and forgets everyone else in doing so—beauty, youth, health, wealth—everything. And yet she calls herself unhappy, I believe. I could teach her what unhappiness is. It is to be left alone in agony. Not content with all that life has given her, she has taken away every comfort that life had spared to me. She has robbed me of everything, and left me bare to face my misery quite alone. Ah, the horrible, damnable injustice of it! What has she done to be so blessed? What have I done to be so cursed? I have always done my duty, always scrupulously tried to do my duty. And now this—*this*. And I pitied her! I wanted to comfort her! How absurdly weak one is! It is she that should spend every day and every hour in trying to comfort *me*, in trying to make up to me for the vile injustice of Heaven, in trying to atone to me for the harm that she has done me. Yes; and she might try and try for all her life, and yet she could never get the balance poised between us. And I actually pitied her for a moment! I actually thought of sacrificing my own feelings

to make her happy! It is not from me the sacrifice is owing.'

The Lady Lisa gathered that the conversation was no longer addressed to her. The stiff fingers had ceased to fumble at her ears. She grew bored, yawned elaborately, stretched herself, and then hopped lightly to the floor.

CHAPTER XV

ONCE more the Dean of Lunemouth sat in Mr. Ladon's room. Red firelight filled the shadowy space, and the night was cold. Mr. Ladon had finished speaking, and neither man any longer broke the silence. But though neither spoke, no privacy was felt between them. For a third Presence, a Presence royal and irresistible, had come into the private place, heralded by Tempest Ladon's words. And before the King of Shadows both men were dumb.

The Dean sat in a deep leathern chair, a glass of water at his hand. The light in the room was low, and he could not clearly see the features of his host beyond the pillared fireplace. In the dimness a fancy seized him that no features, no body, were there, but that Pain had found a voice, and spoken. Often before had the Dean heard such stories of fear and doom. But his was a nature on whom they always struck with their primitive pity and horror. He knew better than to attempt the feeble therapeutics of language. Unbroken silence is the only language of deep sympathy. Inspired by the wordless encouragement of the other, Mr. Ladon had unfolded, bit by bit, the whole tale of his sufferings, of his need for escape, of his terror lest that road of escape should land him in worse places than those from which he had fled. Not seldom had the Dean found already that religion, evolved to ease and help the soul of man on its way, is often turned into a monstrous bugbear, a dragon lurking grimly in his path towards peace

and rest. Yet never before had he found so startling a case of strenuous orthodoxy leading a soul straight into the pit of despair. He sought words at last to fight the difficulty.

'It is written,' said he slowly, 'that no man really can help another in the great battle of life. But, though we must all stand alone before our solid enemies, yet there are evil shadows that a man sometimes raises up against himself; and a friend, perhaps, can help in dissipating such phantom terrors.'

It was characteristic of the Dean that Mr. Ladon had had from him no words of condolence or pity, and that he had never felt the need of them, nor marked their absence. The Dean carried friendship to that deep point where absolute sympathy can be taken for granted by the sufferer without any necessity for formal expression. Mr. Ladon realized all the depth of his brother-in-law's unspoken compassion, knew that his difficulty would be fully felt and most strenuously combated.

'Is damnation such a shadowy fear?' asked Tempest Ladon. 'For the Church promises damnation to all such as die unbaptized or have laid violent hands on themselves.'

'I do not think,' the Dean replied, 'that anyone need concern himself with any opinions that may be expressed by the Church, if they are at variance with the eternal justice and mercy of God. The only matter of significance is to do the best we can for as long as we can, and to rely absolutely on the infinite understanding of the Divine mercy when we fail.'

'But the laws of the Church are strict and unmistakable.'

'Laws have their value—their very great value. But when the laws are made more important in themselves than the life of the souls they were meant to help, then it becomes our duty to remember that they are not all-important. When the Church talks of damnation, in the first place it dares not fully contemplate the whole result of its doctrine;

and, in the second, it is merely underlining to the utmost of its power the helpfulness of its rules and the peril of violating them. The Church's condemnation of suicide is little more than the very strong expression of a universal opinion that suicide is a form of cowardice. As such the ban is useful, but it must not be made of doctrinal rigidity. Every law must be elastic to have any value, and it is impossible to make the Church's disapproval of such terrific force as to dictate unanswerably and for all time every action of God and man. Each word of praise or blame accorded by the Church has its own value and importance; but no such praise or blame must ever be made into an iron and unalterable law.'

'But the Church's opinion must surely be the right opinion, Philip, eh? You so rarely talk of these things.'

'I have always failed to see the importance of talking. To do seems to me so far more important than to preach. Right opinion is a thing so infinitely uncertain, and right action a thing so infinitely certain, that it seems to me rather worse than useless to toil after the unattainable shadow, instead of making good use of the more or less easily attainable substance.'

'But right opinion is the only cause of right action.'

'Quite so, but now you are using the words in a new significance. You are now talking of a sound perception of life and its realities; from that alone, it is true, can proceed right action. But before, you were like so many others, confusing right opinion with dogmatic orthodoxy. Dogmatic orthodoxy need have little or no result in action—in important actions, at least—for good and evil.'

'But you are making works more important than faith,' replied Mr. Ladon, alarmed. 'It is by faith in the Creeds that we are justified, not by any amount of good works. Even the heathen can perform good works; but we know that they are of no effect.'

The Dean sighed.

'It seems to me,' he said, 'that you are inclined to over-estimate the importance of doctrine in religion. In fact, you, and people like you, of whom there are still many appear to take a false view of religion altogether. Surely religion is a guide to the leading of a truthful, merciful, and beautiful life? Every form of religion that does this is true in so far as it does this; every form that does not do this is false and pernicious, in so far as it fails to do this. But many people seem to think that religion is an end in itself—a sort of fetich-worship, by which we can attain salvation through the repeating of incantations and the dutiful observance of many ritual rules of material observance. By this view, obviously, the rules become of paramount importance, and the holy life that they were originally meant to safeguard of none at all.'

'My dear Philip,' said Mr. Ladon, seeing help fast vanishing away, 'you talk like a very good man, but not like a Christian.'

'All good men are Christians, and have always been Christians, not through the dogmas of Christianity, but through the peace that Christianity possesses, in common with all other earnest search for the full beauty of truth.'

'Then you mean that Christianity stands on a level with other forms of religion?'

'Inasmuch as it teaches goodness. Goodness is a thing entire and indivisible. The good man is equal to the good man all the world over, whatever the rules that produce his goodness. And it is clear that only good rules, or rules understood for goodness, can produce goodness. In the whole mass of Christianity the one thing that eternally matters is the first syllable of the word, and it is precisely that syllable which has remained in such general oblivion for nearly twenty centuries. But all men and women who

follow goodness to the utmost stretch of their power are brothers and sisters of Christ, whatever the rules they may take to guide them.'

'But this is horrible—horrible,' said Mr. Ladon. 'You take everything away from me. Where is the importance of a creed, if this is true?'

'You must never forget that Christianity—official Christianity—in its early years made a dangerous mistake in development. It is open to all forms of religion, after their establishment, to follow one of two paths. They may either endeavour to formulate and help right action, or to formulate and crystallize what they consider right opinion. Now, this is an attempt to formulate truth, since right opinion is directed only towards truth as the preacher sees it. And words are a hopelessly inadequate vehicle for thought, so that the spirit of an expressed idea is apt to evaporate in the effort to pour it into a certain inviolable, inelastic mould of phraseology. And thus, sooner or later, the truth itself is lost, and only the hard, dry phrases remain. Even if it were possible, too, to formulate truth, it has often been forgotten that truth, being a thing indivisible, presents itself to many different people from many different aspects; but, until the whole truth can be clearly seen and grasped at one glance, it is doubly useless and dangerous to attempt to define its incomprehensible essence. And Christianity for many centuries has devoted itself almost exclusively to preparing, as it were, so many little stone bottles in which to decant, label, and store so many different vintages of truth. Perhaps in several of them a little of the Divine Spirit still remains, but in many it has long since evaporated, and only the hard and unprofitable bottle remains. In any case, the tendency of Christianity has always been to consider the bottles as far more important than their contents, to exaggerate dogma at the expense of conduct.'

‘So you make religion only an affair of common-sense?’

‘Surely it is plain that dogma is valueless without conduct, but that the value of conduct is quite unaffected by dogma. Conduct is a practical interpretation of principle, dogma a trivial and academic attempt to define the undefinable. Dogma is never useful except as an aid to conduct. Some dogmas give more help than others, and in so much are more valuable; yet their value lies not in themselves, but in their power of helping or hindering action. You, and many of your fellow-Christians, think that dogmas have a fetichistic sanctity of themselves, and that goodness is of little moment compared with the salvation to be magically attained by the scrupulous observance of rules and forms of phrase.’

‘I see what you mean, I think. There is a terrible amount of truth somewhere in what you say. But you are tearing away every plank I have to support me from drowning.’

‘Swim for yourself, Tempest, and do not cling to planks. Swimming will come easy if you try it, though there are few that do. It is less trouble to hang one’s trust on a plank,—until the seas of sorrow rise high and sweep it away.’

‘And you make the mercy of God more infallible than the inspiration of the Church? You tell me to take my own way and trust in the eternal pity of justice. Do you think . . . I can go out of life . . . without fear of the hereafter? But the Church offers me no chance of pardon if I do . . . *that*.’

‘You remind me of a famous parable, Tempest. A certain father lived with his many children in a vast and rambling house. The children were of differing natures, ages, and complexions, but he loved them all alike. So they wrangled and played their childhood through in the

winding, sloping corridors of the old wooden house. But the father stood outside, and saw one day that the woodwork and the eaves were aflame, and that the fire was gaining on the fabric. Ere long the place would be ablaze from floor to roof, and what chance would there be then for the children running hither and thither for safety in the labyrinth of those winding ways? They must be got out, and instantly. Their father called for them long and loud; but they took no notice, and the fire continued to gain upon their home. What was he to do? By rushing in and dragging out the nearest, only two or three, perhaps, could be saved, but the rest must inevitably be consumed. Some other method, clearly, must be devised. Once more the father called them. 'Children,' he cried, 'come out and see the toys I have here for you—toys, many different and delightful toys; toys for each of you to play with to your heart's desire. Come out and see—come quickly and see your toys.' So the children heard him, and from every door of the old winding house they came running in haste to play with the playthings their father had prepared for them. His voice alone had been of no effect, but now for playthings they all left their games and ran hastily out into safety beyond the smoking walls of the burning home.'

The Dean's voice grew richer as he rolled forth the old parable in the rounded simplicity of its original phrases. Mr. Ladon wondered.

'My house is burning over my head,' he answered, 'but I cannot see how your parable is to save me.'

The Dean hesitated.

'I will alter the meaning of the allegory by a little,' he replied. 'The rambling wooden house, of course, is the house of life, and the children playing through its corridors are all the nations of the world. The fire that is seizing on the woodwork and threatening to consume the house and its inmates is, obviously, the

devouring fire of false desires and fears. The father is the great Teacher, the Best Friend of All the World, and He calls His children to escape from the fiery bondage of sorrow and pain, even as He has escaped. And the toys He gives to lure them out, let us say, are the beauties and ceremonial of religion—the robes, the chants, all the trappings in which goodness must go decorated, before the world is ever able to discover its charm. They will not come out of pain into peace without some toy to make their way seem pleasant; and religion, with its many rules and rubrics and adornments, is the toy that all great teachers have offered, sooner or later, to bribe their children out on to the way of salvation, and to beguile their footsteps along its stony surface. But you, Tempest, and so many others, fall into the error of finding more importance in the toys than in the path itself. The toys are but so many concessions to human weakness, not in themselves magic amulets insuring happiness.'

'So that any toy would do as well as any other; and there is no virtue in one more than in another?'

'Any virtue there may be lies in the user, not in the toy he uses. That toy is best for each man which best helps him to fulfil his natural function of goodness. The fundamental crime of so many Christian preachers has been to concentrate attention only on the make of the toy, and to insist that their patent toy, and theirs only, can secure safety, while all the users of all the others must undergo inevitable damnation. For generations nobody saw that the preachers had no authority whatever for saying such groundless things, but were speaking simply out of their own intolerant, though well-meaning, zeal; now, however, we are beginning slowly to realize that goodness itself is the one main thing, and not the precise ceremonial we adopt to help us in our attainment of it.'

'Then a tub-thumper in the Park, or a Pope in the

Vatican, may well think himself as good as the Archbishop of Canterbury any day ?'

'Ask the tub-thumper or the Pope, and he would probably reply that he knew himself to be a great deal better. That is the general error of attaching importance to the means. As a matter of fact, they are all equal, in so far as the goodness they attain is of the same degree and range. The Pope need not appeal to Scripture, nor the Archbishop to Edward VI. or Elizabeth, for the validity of his claim ; each is the peer of the other, if his particular form of plaything is efficacious enough to lead himself and others out of the burning flame of false desire into the true highway of happiness.'

'So that there is no such thing as a heretic anywhere, Philip ?'

'The only heretic in the world is the bad man ; and he is almost invariably only an ignorant one. Among all the bad men I have known, very, very few have really believed themselves to be doing wrong. Usually they had as strong a moral sense as the rest of the world, but they conceived themselves and their own conduct to have a special law to themselves, and to be exempt from all customary judgments. But their first sin was ignorance. Indeed, ignorance, in one of its innumerable forms, one is tempted to pronounce the only real sin in the world. Ignorance is lack of sympathy, ignorance is intolerance, ignorance is cruelty, as well as all the other grosser forms of crime and desire.'

'Damn it all, Philip, you are removing the ancient landmarks wholesale. If goodness is the only thing that matters, where in the world is the use of belonging to the Church of England rather than to the Church of Rome, or the Baptists, or the Shakers, or any monstrous heretical sect in the wilds of America ? Where is the special use of being a Christian at all ?'

'Only if you find your road made smoother by Christian

beliefs and ceremonies than by those of some other form of aid to goodness. If the belief assists the pilgrim, that is the only thing to ask of it. A degraded form is as good in its way as an exalted one, for their virtue lies only in the help they give to the minds that employ them. It is the small soul, the rudimentary soul, the darkened soul, that is most helped by puerile or monstrous forms of belief. But those souls are as certainly moving upwards to the light as any that stand higher on the road, and they have a perfect right to invoke the aid of whatever formula is best able to help them on their upward way towards the daylight. When I read certain books, or hear certain revivalists vociferating, or small and occult forms of superstition trumpeting their claims to a monopoly of salvation, I am a little saddened to think that any souls can be so childish as to find help in such a darkening of counsel. But that, I know, is merely defective sympathy in me. Those souls, if they are truly helped and enlightened by what seems to me mere darkness, are as fully justified in using those methods as am I, or you, in using those that may best help our own particular case. The only thing to consider is that they be benefited, not the philosophical and abstract value of the theory by which they are helped. The theory is nothing, the progress everything. And in time, of course, as they advance on the road, we can aid those souls to shed the outworn monstrosities of the creed by which at first they were helped, but which, as the light grows clearer, becomes more and more of a trammelling hindrance. Positive harm is rare in most doctrines, for even the furious intolerance of most Christian sects is little more than the darker side of enthusiasm; and, as enthusiasm leads its disciples upwards on the path, gradually they outgrow their former arrogance, and the darker side of enthusiasm is left below them in the darkness. To us the beliefs of the multitude seem puerile, horrible, and imbecile. But one must never see things only

from one's own point of view, and the beliefs of the multitude are without doubt adapted to the multitude's need and desire for progress. When they are ready for riper teaching the riper teaching will be given them, for we all evolve in time what our situation most requires. In our little way we can try gently to show them more light; but the only thing of prime importance is that they themselves should be searching for the light, however gloomy may seem to us the cavern of darkness in which they are pursuing their quest. Sooner or later their path will lead them up, and, in its longing to reach the topmost point, all humanity is equal and incomparable, though each soul may stand at a different stage of the road. Do you not remember the old Buddhist proverb which expresses the whole enormous truth of things in a small handful of words? . . . "All paths lead upwards out of the darkness towards the summit, but from the mountain-top all souls behold the same moon." Little matters the path, then, though they whose feet are set on the smoothest road may have great pity for others who wander over stony places, or are obstinately roaming round and round in circles of darkness at the mountain's foot, or tangling themselves wilfully in the thorns of anger and intolerance.'

Mr. Ladon's head was resting on his hand; in his dim eyes a great doubt and fear were gathered. All the hopes and solidities of his creed seemed vanishing into vapour. At last he spoke.

'I ask for bread,' he murmured, 'and you give me this stone. I cannot unravel your fallacies, but all you say is very horrible, and very beautiful as well. It is no help to me. I am told to take our Articles in their literal and grammatical significance, as I value my hopes of salvation. I am told that unless I accept my Creed whole and entire as an English Churchman I shall certainly suffer eternal damnation, even as all Papists, heretics and sectaries must

suffer damnation, however useful their lives may be. Nothing can get over that. It is only belief that can insure our safety. The Church is absolutely clear on the point. And yet you tell me that goodness is the only thing. What about the authority and inspiration of the Church, eh, Philip?’

‘What is the Church, Tempest? A congregation of more or less ignorant, though well-meaning men, assembled under Elizabeth or Constantine or Justinian? And you allow absolute authority to them?’

‘You forget that, whatever they may be, they are inspired by the Holy Ghost as soon as they meet in Council.’

‘In that case, Tempest, though flippancy is far from my taste, you must allow me to say that the Holy Ghost has an unfortunate habit of contradicting Himself and damning His own utterances.’

Tempest Ladon was now far from his own difficulties. Each fresh utterance of his brother-in-law opened for him fresh gulf on gulf of monstrous heresy. The strong theologian on whom he had hoped to rely was now suddenly found to be as a treacherous reed, breaking beneath the hand of confidence, and so rotten with human charity as to have suffered corruption of all doctrinal excellence.

‘Good God!’ he said. ‘And you are a soldier of the Church! The salvation of souls is entrusted to you. And you are a traitor in the camp. Do you say to everyone the same terrible things you have been saying to me?’

The Dean sighed wearily.

‘I am deeply grieved if I have disappointed you, Tempest,’ he answered slowly. ‘I spoke as I thought your need required; I spoke what I hoped your anxiety would recognise as a healing truth. . . . No, naturally I don’t speak so from my pulpit as a priest. But I don’t consider myself disloyal for all that. I have thought the matter over thoroughly—yes, and painfully. I believe that I am doing right; I believe that I am doing the best for all. Don’t

think that your objection has not occurred to me. My duty as a priest is, as I read it, with all my might to help those around me to become better and happier. If I do this, I consider that, as far as in me lies, I am doing good in my small corner of the world. And surely it is better to do good to many than only to one. And the mark of a wise physician is to proportion his remedies to the strength of his patient. Why, if my flock is made happier and better by dogmas and religious practices, should I disturb their progress by untimely proclamation of the higher truths? It is not that their beliefs are false, it is only that their beliefs are but half of the greater truths to which my opportunities have enabled me to attain. I can help them in their own terms, without destroying everything they value by arrogant revelation of its comparative insignificance. That, indeed, would be disloyal and cruel. My part is only to widen their view without roughness where possible, and otherwise guide them towards peace and beauty through the means they have at their disposal. Inasmuch as dogmas and practices help the world, they are true and beautiful. That they are not the highest truth does not prevent them from being true in their kind, as far as they help towards the attainment of truth and calm. In private here, as between man and man, I could talk to you of the highest truths I can see; to reveal the blinding light to all my friends who are good and happy in their twilight would be harsh and unnecessary and confusing to them. Their eyes would dazzle, and their footsteps become uncertain. I am afraid that to you, too, I may have been inconsiderate, Tempest. I ask your pardon if I have spoken too openly. As you say, I have given you what seems a stone instead of the good bread you wanted. It was help within your rules you asked me for, not a revelation that the rules themselves are worse than useless as soon as they begin to bewilder you and make your path unhappy. I cannot unsay what I

have said, but if you will you must believe me wrong, and take your own way untroubled.'

'Thank you, Philip; that is what I shall certainly do,' replied the other. 'But you have given me a bitter revelation indeed. Are there many men like you among your teachers—many such—well . . . goats in sheep's clothing?'

'How else do you suppose the Church could stand or hope to live? The best chance for Christianity nowadays, Tempest, is to remodel its road. It can no longer hope to retain men in bondage by dogmatic thunders and impenetrable hostility to all natural and spiritual truth. The day of Papalism is passing. Men are beginning to inquire and search out, and to demand of religion that it shall help them in the search for truth, not arrogate to itself an unauthorized infallibility. It is by concentrating our attention only on essentials that we of the Church can hope to retain our hold on the world. Women, of course, are always held by fetichistic forms of worship, by observances and beads and images. In so far as the beads give help, the beads are good, but even women are beginning to outgrow those toys. As for men, they are coming to ask us for something more adapted to their developing needs. If we offer them merely the old toys renovated, if we refuse or own ourselves unable to give them manlier aid, they will forsake us, and all our chance of doing good in God's world will be gone for ever. To make Christianity at last as great a force for good as all these centuries its most eager exponents have made it for harm and cruelty, the whole fabric of the faith must be altered, and goodness substituted for orthodoxy as the object of our search and the true idol of our worship. Orthodoxy, as a weapon of salvation, has become useless and even perilous. To fight the world nowadays with orthodoxy is to confront a European nation in battle with a quiver and a bow. We must forget doctrines, Tempest, and remember Christ; we must cast aside all unnecessary

beliefs, such as miracles, and pursue only the beauty of truth. Belief in miracles once had its value in the days of darkness, but now, in the dawn, it has little further use.'

Tempest Ladon eyed him grimly. Here was Satan speaking from unexpected lips indeed.

'Go on,' he said. 'I am curious to hear how much further you will go.'

'I see,' said the Dean sadly, 'that every word I say antagonizes you instead of helping. I could wish I had judged you better before I began. But I judged you by my hopes, and now that you have put true Christianity on its defence, I am afraid you of the old world must hear me out.'

'The old world is the best, Philip.'

'Inasmuch as it gives you comfort, Tempest, the old world is the best for you. 'Good' and 'bad' in matters of thought are words that can only be used in a relative sense, even as drugs can only be good and bad in a relative sense according to their quantity and the state of their subject. But you want to hear from me the full conception of our mission, though I fear it will give you little help. The Church of to-day is a vast organization for doing good and for helping men, as I never tire of saying, to be happier and better. As only the highest truth of all is absolute, we are allowed to use every partial or shadowy truth for good, always selecting that aspect of truth which is best adapted to the needs of those who come to us for aid. Therefore, since the mass of the world is not yet ripe for a complete revelation, we are content to keep the highest truth to ourselves, and to help and guide our flock by help of the older, incompleter ones, knowing that at present the sheep would merely be made unhappy by participation in the greater truths that we are only just beginning to see more clearly for ourselves. Therefore we direct them securely in the old way, and they have no notion, when we lead them in

the Creeds, that the sentences which to them express absolute physical fact to us express metaphysical truth badly translated into the deceptive medium of words. Furious denial, of course, would meet you from many Churchmen if you dared to put this view of their attitude towards them, but true it is; and more: it is the only attitude by which we can hope permanently to secure and enlarge our powers for good in this world. The phrases of our Creeds are all true; but the truth is seen from different angles. To our congregations the truth of a Creed is verbal and complete; from our point of view it is seen only as a vague and partial glimpse of truth, veiled from sight by materialism and stumbling comprehension, further hampered by words, words, words. In time they will reach our point of view, but, until they are so far advanced, our surest way of helping them is by drawing them gradually onwards through the elaboration of their own ideas, until at last they are ready of their own accord to see the higher truth in all its completeness. That is far better than to bring blank dismay and bewilderment into the hearts and lives of many sweet and innocent souls, to whom the old doctrines are the surest help towards a kindly, merciful life.'

'You carry far your belief that belief matters nothing by the side of action,' said Mr. Ladon ironically. 'Go on. I am interested to see the Church of England from within.'

'Much harm, then, is done by precipitate violence in rupturing the old beliefs, which in many cases do not hurt anyone, having lost long since most of their former power of torture and tyranny. Take the cardinal point of the Gospel—that Perfect Goodness knows no death. This vast metaphysical truth of Christ's indestructible immortality has unfortunately been expressed by a material phrase, and the attention of the world has for so long been centred on the supposed fact suggested by the phrase that even now it is not everywhere wise, as cases prove, to imperil our chances

of usefulness, by showing that only far down in the husk of myth there lurks a kernel of all-important truth, which is the only point on which our reverent attention need be fixed. All miracles are truths of immense beauty and value, but, as expressed in the texts and in popular belief, they represent the efforts of half-educated men to express an eternal verity in terms of physical fact. And all our doctors for many centuries have tended to ignore the verity, in clinging to the details of the hypothetical fact which was the best way the chronicle found of enforcing the undoubted Divinity of the Christ. So much so that these misunderstood statements have been taken at last as magic events, through scrupulous and material belief in which salvation can alone be insured. Naturally these vital truths of the Christ are set far away above all material interpretations. But, more than this, the attempt to look upon them as real physical happenings is perfectly irrelevant. The importance of Christianity lies in the teachings of the Christ. The Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon in the Plain are not affected either one way or the other by any consideration as to whether their Preacher was born of a virgin, or rose physically from the dead. It is but a stumbling faith in Christ's teaching that requires to have it guaranteed, as it were, by stories of supernatural juggling with physical laws. Of course, in human weakness the complication is almost inevitable. There needs must be something marvellous about the great Master. The birth and death of Shakya-Buddha are equally enveloped in a mist of equally true and credible miracle. But we are coming to a day when it grows clearer and clearer that the lesson is everything, and the material details of the Teacher's life are nothing. We allow these stories more and more easily to slide from our thoughts, asserting more and more strongly the immense importance of what they represent. The advance is slow. People love to consider the literal occurrence of such events

as a sort of supernatural pledge that something astonishing is to happen to themselves, as a supernatural charm to insure prosperity and blessedness here and hereafter. But the advance is equally sure, whether we of the Church assist or hinder. The Christ and the Buddha both are of infinitely greater importance than the legends that lesser men have woven round them, and which generations of the simple devout have long taken for surer guides to safety than the words of the preachers they were spun to glorify.'

Mr. Ladon laughed a little.

'Why,' he said, 'and I came to you for advice and help. It ought to have been the other way about. There are many things I could teach you. I wonder where you picked up all these strange, monstrous ideas? Whatever you may pretend you think, I know you are really a good man and a Christian—at least, I feel it, somehow. Otherwise, and if you hadn't spoken in confidence, I cannot tell what I might not have felt myself compelled to do. However, I suppose your ideas cannot do much harm as long as you only keep them for my benefit. Thank God, though, that I have always been contented with the Church of England. No thinking and bothering over religious questions for me. The Thirty-nine Articles give me all I need. I don't need to stray into Romanism and Heathenism and Dissent so long as I have *them* before me. They speak with no uncertain voice, and salvation lies there and nowhere else. Everything I want is contained between the leaves of our Prayer-Book. Whatever I am, I am a Christian.'

'Pardon the suggestion,' said the Dean, 'but I understood that you appealed to me for advice in your most unhappy case, simply because the Prayer-Book rather frightened than helped you at this particular juncture.'

A heavy silence fell. Mr. Ladon felt suddenly as if the

string that tethered him to his fear had been sharply jerked, throwing him back again into the toils.

'Yes,' he answered slowly, 'I am in a difficulty, I admit. But evidently you cannot help me. You have not even attempted to show me that suicide can ever be justifiable in the eyes of the Church.'

'I did what I could to persuade you that God is eternally just and merciful. The Church is too fond of denying God's justice and pity. I advised you to put your trust in Him. More than that I cannot do; more than that no man has a right or power to do for another. For each man must make for himself alone the road in which he alone can walk. It is cowardly to put a middleman between yourself and God—to throw the responsibility of your own action upon some irresponsible third person. That view of the priest's office is false and pernicious.'

'Death and eternal judgment, Philip. Nothing can alter that.'

'Alas that the idea ever took root that death exists! Death is a mere phantom fear. How can the invisible and formless spirit undergo the merely bodily and outward change which is all that we mean by death? But Christianity has cast across the world, like a blight, the notion that life is a thing finite and terminable, that death is an end, and judgment an eternity. Until we have seen the truth—that our own actions alone are hell and heaven, that our life is a thing knowing neither birth nor death, and that we ourselves, in ourselves, must work out, in the process of purgation, all the sins which we have nurtured or allowed, in a stretch of enormous time, punctuated incessantly by those unimportant commas that we call deaths—until we have realized this, our souls will never be set free from false terrors to face the glorious daylight of truth without vain shrinkings and despair. There is no death; there is only life, indestructible and eternal. And, for the

judgment, we ourselves must automatically judge ourselves, and work out heaven and hell in our own lives, in due measure as we ourselves have sinned or struggled in the meshes of vain desire. There should be no prayer, no magical appeals, only effort in ourselves after clear sight. For in our own effort lies our own salvation.'

'Do as we like, in fact?'

'No; do as we ought to like,' replied the other, rising from his chair, 'and thus, in the fulness of time, effort will cease, and we shall be liking what we do. As for you, Tempest you are on trial before a bar where you yourself are sitting in judgment. Do as you will. No one can divert or alter your sentence on yourself. What you feel you must do, that you will do, and it is best to do it confidently and without fear. All that others can do for you is to kill the useless dread of phantoms in your mind. Death is only shadow without substance, a hideous bugbear of our own invention. The first step of true religion is to kill for ever our fear of the ugly fancy that we ourselves have for ages set up to terrify ourselves, like silly children.'

'You have given me no hope, but much to think about,' said Tempest Ladon slowly, as they parted for the night.

CHAPTER XVI

ABORTIVE as Mr. Ladon's recurrence to the Dean's advice had been, it seemed as if his disease were bitterly angry with him for the mere thought of escape. For hardly had his brother-in-law left him than pain came down upon him like a blinding storm. With a suggestion of actual personal animosity and resentment, his disease clutched at him with venomous hands, and through the infinite hours of that interminable night rocked him to and fro in a passion of irresistible fury. As he beat with ineffectual, despairing hand upon the impregnable agony safely lodged within his skull, as he stumbled hither and thither in an animal's stupid effort at escape, or lay collapsed upon the floor in a moment's interval of deceptive peace, he felt indeed that he was in the grip of an inexorable foe. Rolling himself to and fro upon the ground, he cried aloud for a little relief from torment; striking his head against hard surfaces, he prayed that he might quiet the enemy if only for a second. But the disease was inflamed with anger, and would hear no cry for pity. With wicked malice it clawed at every fibre of his being, until the world of consciousness was melted before his eyes into an indeterminate haze of blood-shot pain. Nothing remained real any more, only this devastating anguish. Nothing in all his previous experience had been so terrible, so prolonged, so vicious in its deliberate cruelty. In the insane darkness he seemed to see and hear the spite of the thing that sat within his brain, picking away the threads of his life, unravelling the web of sanity

to a mere tangle of screaming madness. He seemed clearly to see it, a shapeless tiny nodule, palpitating with blood-vessels and life ; a thing without ears or talons or eyes, yet horribly endowed with life and volition of its own ; a formless devil that sat within him, intent on relentless mischief, steadily eating away the health and hope of its host. The thing had a will, a choice of its own, even a brain to itself—a brain capable of cunning and vengeful rage, though never of mercy or fatigue. It was in him, yet not of him—a thing compounded of his own flesh and blood, yet a deadlier enemy to his flesh and blood than ever Goneril or Regan to theirs. It was a parricide, fattening on the very life that had given it birth. How, by what monstrous wedlock, had he been made father to this hideous abortion? And the thing was unescapable ; never could he get away from it—not for an hour, not for a moment. Though it so hated him, yet it was of his essence, and into whatever dim paths of refuge he might carry his hunted soul, there, and there always, must he carry with him that tiny evil Sinbad. For, in a strange, horrible way, it was himself ; and between himself and his life only Death, the priest of mercy, could ever pronounce a sentence of divorce. His skull was a round globe of hell ; it seemed to him luminous and transparent in the night with the sheer anguish of it, as he writhed across the carpet, clutching and beating at that pain he was to carry with him always, down to death. And, in the quivering jelly of mere torment that his brain had now become, perpetually he saw the evil thing ensconced, and heard its voice as it sat, devising mischief, plucking now at one thread of feeling and now at another, with freakish deliberation, until the music of his life was turned into a wild and muffled dirge of despair.

Conscious rectitude sustains alike the martyr and the persecutor at the stake. Men have fronted hideous pain of their own free-will, and emerged with more or less triumph

from the unnatural struggle. But when pain comes down in its full panoply as an enemy unchallenged, then there are few that can long resist its onslaught. As a strong man armed, agony descends upon the body, and it is but a matter of hours before the philosopher or the saint is a mad, screaming child again. Pain is resistless, crushing, omnipotent, annihilating all the landmarks of life—resolve, and self-control, and sanity—blurring the whole well-ordered landscape of our days with an impenetrable veil of anguish. Mr. Ladon was a man stout and strong, a man of courage, of endurance, of self-control, though the foundations of his strength had long been sapped by the influences of solitude and the insidious campaign of his disease. Yet still he had hitherto remained an imposing tower of vitality. And now, in the course of a few hours, all his fortifications were brought low in a welter of ruin. When the grey, cold dawn peered peevishly through the windows of his room, its gaze discovered him prostrate, voiceless, speechless, motionless, the mere shell of a burnt-out agony whose own intensity had consumed itself. He had capitulated, surrendered, thrown himself utterly at the feet of his enemy. And, in the hour of triumph, his pain drew off at last, to rejoice in the completeness of its victory. The little devil of his brain was satisfied with its night's work, and relaxed its efforts for a while, to gloat over the prospect of the devastation it had wrought. Slowly pale waves of life crept coldly back into his heart, and an ashen consciousness replaced the incandescence of his despair. He found a moment's release, and dimly gave thanks from the numbed depths of his being as gradually the moment lengthened, and yet the enemy gave no further sign. But, as the blood flowed back into warmth, darker reflections took the place of this mere animal relief. As he drew away from the night into the day, the horror of all he had undergone grew and grew intolerably in his memory. No words, no groans could paint the absolute

fury of the agony he had suffered. Hell itself could not be worse—hell itself would be not too high a price to pay for release from these torments. Here, in the confusion of his brain, his thoughts ran together, conflicted, tangled. But above all the contradictions of theory gradually this one thought emerged from all the rest and assumed perfect dominance over his consciousness: Nothing, nothing, nothing should bar the way of his escape. He had not known what pain meant, when he had so glibly talked of bearing whatever life might send, rather than take refuge in death. He had had no feeblest inkling of the power permitted to physical anguish, when he had loudly proclaimed his stoicism. He had thought himself fine and strong in doing so, yet then the pain had only lightly stroked him with a delicate finger. And now she had laid her hand on him, and he foresaw how it would be when her touch should tighten to a grip. At any cost he must be gone before that time. There was no longer any consideration of weakness or cowardice; it was only clear that nothing could justly force him to endure the horrors that he foresaw awaiting him. His son and his daughter must take their share of the burden. It would be quixotic folly to spare them any longer. They would resent their exclusion from his confidence when at last they came to know his secret. After all, it was their privilege, their right, to be made partakers of his trouble. That is what relationship means. And, in common justice, he would no longer deny them their prerogative. In a piteous hurry, as soon as light and life were fully astir once more in Ottemer, he sent for his son, and in stumbling, rapid utterance told him everything and clamoured to him for help.

St. John Ladon was a man whose mind was not capacious of many concurrent thoughts. Ever since his marriage his meditations had dealt entirely with his wife—her beauties, her misfortunes, and the way to make her happy. In this

employment he himself had found a diversified happiness, and it had effectually prevented him from giving much attention to his father. In so far as he had thought at all about Mr. Ladon, he had considered him to be plodding satisfactorily upon a beaten way of life, though soured and made slightly difficult of temper by the influences of jealousy and age. Now, therefore, the news of his father's deadly illness came upon him as a stunning shock, throwing his mind entirely out of its stride, and so jerking all his consciousness from its usual path that he was not able to greet the tidings with any coherence of mind. In the case of persons whose ideas are few and strong, it needs time rather than eloquence to divert them from one fixed view to contemplation of a new one. St. John Ladon stood blank in his confusion, as the older man unfolded the case; then he collapsed into a chair, his white face hidden in shaking hands. His reserved nature had suffered his powers of expression to rust, and now, in his need, he could find no words adequate for the agony of sick, dazed pity with which his heart now staggered and rocked.

'Oh, God! oh, my good God!' was as much as he could say. . . . 'Oh, father, you should have told me sooner!'

'But now you see how it is,' whispered the other hurriedly—'you see how it is. There is only one thing to do now, St. John.'

The other answered slowly, not understanding, not noticing, bent only on finding words for the sympathy with which his verbal impotence so piteously battled.

'Yes, father—yes. . . . But are you sure that there is no hope—no hope at all? Are you perfectly certain?'

After his night's experience, the question exasperated Mr. Ladon beyond endurance. What were all the hopes of heaven compared with the ever-present fear of a second hell like that? He drummed viciously upon the table.

'Didn't I tell you so,' he answered with a feeble pettish-

ness. 'Do you suppose one gives up all hope for sheer love of despair? Oh, I can't talk to you yet. I had a bad night, I tell you—a damnably bad night! I am still bewildered and stupid.'

His son did not reply for a moment, then spoke slowly.

'But it is all so sudden,' he said, 'I can hardly understand it yet. And if what you say is true, I cannot make out what anyone can do for you, father. What is there that I can do? There does not seem anything to be done. . . . Ah, you must have made a mistake. This is too horrible!—oh, God, too utterly horrible!'

His father looked up at him with distended eyes, in which acute annoyance struggled to dissemble its irritation. The fellow was too dense, too stupid, for any words. This was all the use of your clever, bright people. Confront them with an emergency, and they stare at you like owls and become perfectly incapable. Mr. Ladon saw very well what was to be done, what was the only thing to be done, but he did not yet quite like to put his project into words. Unless the younger man should see the way of escape for himself, his father would have to indicate it to him in plain syllables; and as Mr. Ladon, even at this juncture, shrank away from such a crude unveiling of the horror, his anger was proportionately kindled against the blockish dulness that threatened to make such unveiling a necessity.

'You don't see any way out?' said Mr. Ladon at last. 'One of these days you will—at least, if you have the brains of a fish.'

'Yes,' replied the other more tranquilly; 'in time I dare say we may hammer out something. We will hammer out something, father. There *must* be some doctor for this kind of thing, you know. It never does to despair too soon.'

The mention of time lashed up Mr. Ladon's consciousness that no time—not an hour, not a moment even—was

to be lost in carrying out his plan. At any moment now the agony might come down upon him once more, and wipe him out from among the sane. Every word in his son's sentence stung him to fury.

'You talk,' he said, 'as if my knowledge were not definite and final. Well, if you want to help me . . .'

'*Want* to help you!' murmured the other.

'Yes, want to help me. . . . You may not have the nerve. But if you want to help me, it ought not to take you long to find a way. I can see it staring you in the face. I won't tell you yet, but you will find it very soon—very soon, St. John. When you have found the way, St. John, swear to me that you will take it—swear to me. I must have your promise, your word of honour, that you won't disappoint me, St. John.'

His son could hardly fail to notice the new note of tense anxiety that had come into the other's voice. That voice, so pale and pulseless before, now thrilled with a hoarse shrillness.

'Of course I will not disappoint you,' replied St. John, with an awkward eagerness that showed the ardour of his own anxiety. 'I will do anything in the world you ask me—anything I can possibly do to ease you, father. Good God! you did not need to ask me that!'

Exultation flooded the consciousness of his father.

'That will do—that will do,' he answered quickly; 'I want no more. You have given me your promise.'

'And yet I cannot see how I am to be of any use—for the life of me I cannot see,' replied St. John in a voice of puzzled sadness.

His blindness maddened the other.

'Oh, who asks you to see?' he said. 'All you are asked to do is to act when the time and the opportunity are ready. We must have everything decently and in order, for the sake of the family. I only want to have the inevitable done

for me quickly and quietly. You are the best person to do it, and you have promised. Surely you must see where my road takes me? But it winds, St. John, it winds, and I want you who are nearest to me to give me a lift over the stile that gives me a short-cut.'

When we are chained to contemplation of ordinary life and ordinary ideas, it is not always easy to switch off our consciousness on to wild and extraordinary notions. But at this point a dim knowledge of what his father meant leapt into being in St. John Ladon's brain. He paled.

'You . . . you don't mean . . . *that*?' he gasped, moistening dry lips.

In the annihilating silence he seemed for a moment to lose consciousness. Another instant, and he heard his father speaking once more.

'I don't understand you,' he was saying. 'What are you talking about? I am not asking you to do anything monstrous. And I have your promise.'

'I beg your pardon; I ought to have trusted you more. Only there was a damnable vagueness about what you said, and your voice seemed . . . strange, somehow—like the voice of a man on the edge of something beastly. Oh, you know that there is nothing in the world I will not do for you if I can—within the right limits, of course.'

'And I have your promise,' replied his father. 'Understand that. You cannot give your promise and take it back again.' Then, clutching at diplomacy once more, to cloak his excitement: 'Go now; my breakfast will be coming in in a minute. Go and eat yours, and think of me, St. John. Think over all that we have been saying, and see what light breaks in upon you. There is nothing horrible about what you are to do for me—nothing horrible at all. It is quite simple—just a plain piece of human kindness. You will see it for yourself if you only think.'

'Think? My head begins to ache with thinking. . . .'

His father interrupted him with a violent start.

'Not ache—not ache!' he gasped. 'Your head does not really ache, St. John? That was only your way of putting it? Say it was only your way of putting it. Damn it all! don't be all day answering me.'

His son was astounded at the vigour and the sudden fire of the question.

'Of course, it was only a silly phrase,' he said. 'No; all I meant was that I am thinking hard, and yet I cannot see anything I can do to help you—anything possible. But for a moment you did frighten me. You seemed on the verge of asking for—oh, something impossible.'

Tempest Ladon had a new idea for approaching his desire.

'What?' he keenly inquired.

His son paled again, stammered, and was silent a moment.

'I can't answer,' he said at last. 'I am too much ashamed of myself. My idea was monstrous and idiotic. No decent Christian could ask another to do the thing I was ass enough to imagine for a moment that you wanted me to do—much less a real thorough-going Christian like you.'

It was Mr. Ladon's turn to be smitten with horror.

'I don't know, I don't know,' he murmured. 'Rules have their limitations, I suppose, and special cases have their special laws.'

But St. John had been too well trained by his father to accept such Jesuitry. With a great effort he began to unveil his deepest feelings.

'No,' he replied, 'you know better than that, father. What is wrong once is wrong always. I have never had to think much about such things, because I believe more in doing than in bothering; but I am sure no special circumstances can ever excuse a crime or a wrong of any kind,

worse luck. We have got to do what the Church and the Commandments tell us, I suppose, and there is no margin of interpretation left us. What they say we must do, and what they forbid we must not do, and no amount of good motives can ever justify us in disobedience, or life would be too hideously complicated. So you need not try to apologize for me by making out that I could ever have suggested the horrible thing I was fool enough to think I heard in your voice for a moment.'

Checkmated by the results of his own sound education, Tempest Ladon lay back in his chair, a picture of white anger and despair.

'Go,' he muttered at last—'go! . . . Can't you see that I have had enough of this? Try to be less uncharitable—and, for the Lord's sake, go!' he concluded, his strangled utterance rising suddenly to its keenest note.

The younger man was still puzzled.

'You are so strange this morning, father,' he said. 'Mind you have a good breakfast.'

'Damn the fool!' replied his father; 'you talk as if one had a sentence of death by torture every other day in the week. Go! Do you hear me?'

In a silent passion of pity and remorse, St. John Ladon left the room without another word.

During the course of the trying dialogue strength had been steadily returning to Mr. Ladon in the wake of his increasing annoyance. Not yet had he dared fully to face the truth of his desire, but he had played with the subject in the hope that St. John would, of his own accord, suggest the obvious remedy that his father shrank as yet from prescribing coldly in so many words. And now, for all his manœuvring, his son had shied violently away from the idea so soon as even its shadow had fallen across the dialogue. And yet, what could be more noble, more grateful to God and man, than the service that the slowly dying

needed so urgently at the hands of the living? Suicide—ah! suicide is a thing impossible—damnable for every Christian soul. The stupid Dean, with his vague Buddhism, had thrown no light on any means by which the crime could be made dogmatically justifiable. It remained a sin punishable with eternal fire, a thing, never—now that cool blood was returning and memory slowly fading—never, under any provocation of physical torment, to be dared by any believing soul. That way was impossible, but—euthanasia! euthanasia! there was a gracious gift to receive at the loving hands of a son! Last gift, and greatest, altogether noble and holy. And yet that son apparently had silly, hysterical scruples—was so hag-ridden by convention and hard rules that he could not face the possibility of any exception in their working. His dense selfishness did not bear thinking of. Accordingly, Mr. Ladon thought of it acrimoniously and persistently all through his breakfast and the long morning that succeeded. He would succeed in converting the fool, of course, but it was aggravating to the last point that the fool should need converting. Mr. Ladon forgot that he had given his son a long and persistent course of teaching admirably calculated to banish common-sense from his mind, and to substitute its office by that of so many stereotyped rules of old-world religious ethics admitting of neither salutary compromise nor violation. Now he was to suffer the penalty of his own orthodoxy twice over—in his own scruples first, and now in his son's. He declined to consider the nature of the service he was demanding as his right, but fixed his mind on the callous egoism, the unfilial obstinacy, the heartless ingratitude of a son who could deny such services to a dying father. Through the long hours Mr. Ladon worked himself into a more and more exaggerated state of aggrieved self-righteousness, until the returning vigour of his mind took the form of ominous anger. Even the Lady Lisa was driven from his

lap, and slapped in the face when she attempted to return. Greatly indignant and injured in her feelings, she sat crouched at a distance, watching him with reproachful, blazing eyes. Then, when he had chewed to madness the cud of bitter reflection, and thereby stored up an efficient supply of ill-temper, Mr. Ladon at length took his letters and began to read them. It was a bad day for curates asking assistance in church restoration, a bad day for tenants entreating reductions or repairs. Each successive letter, for no particular reason, intensified the restless bitterness of his mood. And the last he read set the crown upon his evil mood. In the pointed, spidery writing of a bygone day the irritating communication ran :

‘DEAR MR. LADON,

‘I feel Myself compelled to approach you on a painful Matter, which no doubt you will be able to explain to My Satisfaction. Yesterday I seized My Opportunity, as a Neighbour and Friend of *Several Centuries Standing*, to pay My first Visit to Mrs. Ladon of Ottemer. I was told by the butler that Mrs. Ladon was not at Home, and yet, as I was driving away from the Door, I *distinctly* saw Mrs. Ladon standing upon the Lawn, and I cannot feel Myself justified without inquiring of you, as the Head of your House, whether her *conduct* was the result of *deliberate intention* ? If you have decided to break off the Friendship existing between the Ladons and My Husband’s Family since the Jeremy Bolpett of Queen Elizabeth’s Time, I have *no more* to say ! No doubt you know best, and the loss, I *imagine*, will be as much yours as Ours !! I cannot think it possible that you should consider the Bolpetts of Bolpetts not *good enough Company* for Ladons of Ottemer. But there is no telling what strange notions arise in the heads of comparatively new Families, and, if this should be *the case*, you have only to tell Me, and *be sure* that you will hear no

more from Me on the Matter. Meanwhile, however, I will hope, for *everyone's* Sake, that the Affair admits of a more *reasonable* interpretation !

‘ Pray believe me,

‘ Yours Sincerely,

‘ GEORGIANNA-SARAH BOLPETT, OF BOLPETTS.’

Taken on the raw, rubbed spot of his mood, this letter flicked Mr. Ladon like an envenomed lash. He had spent many years quite happily without exchanging a syllable with Georgianna-Sarah Bolpett of Bolpetts, and yet, inasmuch as she worthily bore the name of Bolpett, she stood to Mr. Ladon for an important and very estimable thing, quite independent of the consideration that she herself was a bore of the dreariest degree. As Georgianna-Sarah she was nothing, as a Bolpett of Bolpetts she was a great deal to Mr. Ladon, accustomed, through the long years of his seclusion, to meditate on the value and beauty of that social law which, in those dim provincial recesses, accorded such an exalted position, on twin thrones, to Bolpetts and Ladons alike. And now the pert suburban miss, the underbred, beautiful barmaid who had entrapped his selfish fool of a son, had taken it upon herself, out of sheer caprice or insane pride in her new position, to insult her nearest neighbour in the most flagrant and brutal manner. As Mrs. Bolpett remarked, the friendship of centuries was now to be senselessly ruptured by the arrogance, or the ignorance, or the ill-breeding of a creature whose father came from Blackpool and smelt of hair-oil. All the dead Jeremy Bolpetts, all the bygone Blandas and Melusinas of Ottemer, rose up from their graves to protest against the outrage inflicted on their representatives by a young woman without manners, name, or pedigree. The insult could not be borne. As best he might, Mr. Ladon wrote a soothing letter to Mrs. Bolpett, venomously apologetic at Barbara's expense; then he

angrily rang the bell, and requested that Mrs. Ladon might be called before him.

He had long to wait. Barbara was in no mood for distraction. Cousin Coralie was at her most trying. She and her party were, as usual, beguiling slow time by playing Bridge with their hostess. Lady Morland's methods were perfectly frank. She gaily, openly, skittishly cheated from the beginning of the game to its end. Mr. Lancaster was too respectful, and Barbara too bored, to make any protest. But unfortunately Miss Treves, usually so submissive and obedient, developed a desperate independence over Bridge. She played well, and, in the excitement of the struggle, quite forgot all her subservience to Lady Morland. Bitterly, in high and metallic tones, did the two women wrangle and bicker at each other across the table. The little Kitwankle, brisk and bright as ever, checked her patroness on every point, discovered her frauds, and insisted on their rectification. Their games were usually characterized by a guerilla warfare of a more or less lively kind; but on this occasion boredom had so wrought on the two combatants that the rubber soon developed into a pitched battle, stern and pitiless. Neither cared what she said, and Barbara was ere long exhausted in her vain attempts to preserve even a semblance of decency and calm. At that point did she receive Mr. Ladon's summons.

'Bother,' said Barbara; 'I'll come in a minute. Look here, Tessa: you did revoke—you know you did.'

But neither of the amazons listened; the combat waged without interruption; the butler retired hastily. Mr. Lancaster looked unhappy, and in the background Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, as usual, drowsed gently over her knitting.

'It don't matter what I do,' proclaimed Lady Morland in an aggrieved screech. 'I shall jolly well do what I want, and if you do not like it, Miss Treves, you can just

lump it—so there! I'll not be dictated to by a nobody like you, and don't you think it.'

'Think yourself somebody, don't you?' sneered Miss Treves, while Barbara wondered what she had done to deserve so intolerable a scene. 'And you cheating like a cardsharp all the time. And can't even cheat like a lady, either! Well, if I *was* so stupid that I had to cheat so as to get through a rubber at all, I declare I'd take a little trouble and do it decently.'

'Look here,' began Barbara.

'Decently! Hoo! Don't you talk! A lot you know about decency, Miss Katherine Treves. Decently, indeed!'

Lady Morland snorted heavily, but her torrent of virtue was stemmed by a shrill squeal from the enemy.

'Put your head in a bag,' shrieked Miss Treves. 'Go and teach your grannie to suck duck's eggs and throw away the shells.'

'I think, my love,' at this point observed a soft and fluffy voice behind them, while the warriors paused to take fresh breath—'I think, my dear Barbara, that my brother asked you to go to him. I am afraid you make my brother wait.'

'I wonder you aren't ashamed,' declaimed Lady Morland with magnificence, 'to talk so disgustingly before a clergyman's lady, Miss Treves.'

Barbara rose hastily and left the room. As she went the battle flared up with redoubled fury, and Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth retired once more into her impregnable fortress of somnolence. Sickened with irritation, disgust, helpless anger, Barbara slowly wandered upstairs, prepared to meet her father-in-law with an unyielding front. What could the tiresome old man be wanting? and what in the world had possessed him to send for her like a servant from her own occupations? She was ready and eager to work off on him, should he turn nasty, some of the superfluous energy of

wrath so abundantly generated in her mood by the shameless conduct of Cousin Coralie and her friend. Confirming herself in a resentful and inflammable temper, she reached his room at last, knocked, and firmly entered with what she imagined to be a stately and great-lady-like demeanour.

CHAPTER XVII

'WELL, you have been time enough!' was the growled greeting that received her.

'Have I kept you waiting?' was her lofty reply. 'I was busy.'

'As you were yesterday afternoon, eh?' said Mr. Ladon, 'amusing your delightful house-party.'

'I don't know what you are alluding to,' said Barbara suspiciously.

'I'll soon unfold the matter. Tell me, are there such things as manners at Surbiton?'

'I don't understand what you mean.'

Tempest Ladon was seated before his table, on the other side of which Barbara stood, suggesting a criminal at the bar. In some vague way feeling the analogy for herself, she became assertive and clamorous of carriage. With an aggravated flounce of silk petticoats, she let herself down into an adjacent chair with elaborate grace. Her adversary stared.

'I apologize,' he said. 'Evidently there *are* manners in Surbiton, and here is a sample. What I wished to observe——'

'I dare say,' interrupted Barbara; 'but I wish you would not send for me in that ridiculous way when I am busy. You are always sure to see me soon enough.'

'I perfectly agree with you, my daughter-in-law—I am always sure to see you soon enough. Were I unkind, I might say that too soon is the latest one ever sees of you.'

'Footnotes, please!' murmured the enemy, fanning herself insolently with a piece of blotting-paper.

'You prefer clubs to rapiers, then? Probably you are wise. Very well. I sent for you to tell you that while you are in my house I expect you to treat my guests and my friends with some attempt at courtesy. And if, as seems certain, you have no notion what courtesy may be, I intend to teach you on the spot. Is that plain enough for your intellect?'

His voice rose to a malign snarl. The suddenly revealed inveterate enmity of it frightened the woman in the chair. Always beautifully pale, she grew paler. Venomous anger, rather than an ordinary scolding, seemed to be what she had been called upstairs to confront.

'What do you mean? What are you going to do?' she asked.

'I mean this: that when you wish not to receive an old friend of my family, you will be wise in future not to let that friend see you standing within three yards of her as she drives away. Such conduct is apt to give people a painfully true idea of your birth and upbringing, Barbara. Let me tell you that in our class of life that sort of conduct is considered rude.'

'I am very sorry,' began Barbara hurriedly, knowing herself wrong, and prepared for penance. 'Really and truly, I am very sorry. It was all a mistake.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' he answered, unappeased. 'Everything you do is a mistake. Everything you *are* is a mistake, too, one might add. In any case, your action of yesterday is more than usually unpardonable even for you. It had, of course, the great advantage of sparing a well-bred woman the sight of your truly dreadful relations, but that is a blessing we cannot expect *you* to have appreciated.'

As it was for this reason alone that Barbara had refused

to receive Mrs. Bolpett, she naturally resented the accusation bitterly. She flamed.

'You can say what you like about me, more or less,' she cried, 'but I am not going to have you sneering at my relations. They cannot help being what they are; and, anyhow, they are kind-hearted, good-natured people, which is more than I can say for my husband's.'

But the intolerable low voice went creaking on.

'We will not enter into any argument as to the relative merits of Ladons and Lancasters. The question offers so little ground for discussion as to be quite uninteresting. The only point you are now concerned with is how to make proper apologies to Mrs. Bolpett. I have already written to her, explaining that you knew no better, but should soon be taught. You yourself, however, are also going to write to her now to express your sorrow on your own account.'

This was too much for Barbara. She rose.

'Indeed I will not,' she said. 'You seem to think I am a child to be bullied and driven from pillar to post. I tell you I am sorry about that stupid old woman yesterday, but if you think I am going to grovel before her, you are very much mistaken.'

'That stupid old woman has been in this county for several centuries, let me tell you.'

'She looks it. Anyhow, you now have heard what I have got to say, and now I am going back to my room. You have insulted me enough.'

'Do you talk of insult? This is a new departure. And you are going downstairs, are you? I think not.' Mr. Ladon rose, gaunt and rugged. Leaning across the table, he fixed his enemy with terrible glaring eyes. His voice sank to a whisper. 'Do as I tell you,' he murmured—'do as I tell you at once. Sit down again in that chair—sit down, I say!'

There was a heavy pause. Barbara stood paralyzed in

his withering glance. Her determination failed her ; her senses began to waver.

'I won't—I won't!' she cried with a fiery defiance that marked her consciousness of weakness.

Very gently he touched her arm. 'You will—you will,' he whispered intensely. 'Sit down quietly and quickly—very quietly and very quickly.'

A passion of terror ran through her veins. He seemed murderous in his deadly calm. There was something fearful about the tense gentleness of his determination. His touch, his voice, were ominous and deadly. In her terror she thought him mad.

'Let me go!' she wailed. 'I am frightened! What are you going to do? I won't, I tell you!' But even as she spoke, her will and her resolve weakened and turned to water beneath his inexorable, penetrating stare. The room reeled before her eyes.

'Think again, think again,' he whispered, smiling evilly. 'I believe you will do as I tell you—I believe you will.'

Silence fell, broken only by her hurried, violent breathing. Suddenly, with a little choked sigh, her resistance gave out. Swaying, collapsing, she dropped into the chair he indicated, and took up a pen. The battle of wills was over, and all her forces put to utter rout. Her father-in-law, triumphant in his victorious hate, spared her no syllable of degradation, of shame. The letter that he dictated was even abject in its servility. And Barbara made no more protest. Like a thing mechanical, she traced out each humiliating word, and gave no sign of life. At last the trial was over; the letter was signed, enveloped, sealed, directed. Still she seemed numbed and dead; her individuality lay trampled, annihilated, stunned beneath the feet of his, reinforced by the fiery inspiration of agony and madness. He stood looking down upon her. In her utter abdication of will, her complete surrender of volition, she was a beautiful toy given

over into his hands—a very beautiful toy—so gloriously frail, so white, so wild-eyed, beneath the weight of that splendid hair. Her head, her whole frame, seemed to droop piteously beneath his heavy yoke, but his mood could no longer be touched by appeals to his compassion. Only the tyrannous hate of his heart could now be served by the pitiful weakness and tragedy of her collapse; her trembling, beautiful lips, the dumb anguish of her great eyes, served only to feed his sense of power, the angry dominance of his jealousy. Now she was his; now she was at his feet. His hands twisted and turned at his side as he thought how this beautiful toy was in their power. A movement of their writhing muscles, and she could be trapped, shaken at their pleasure. Her long, bare throat, so exquisitely bowed, shone white between the fire of her hair and the diaphanous darkness of her dress. Only a very little effort, a little delicious flutter, and she would be strangled and dead within his grip. He saw the joy of it, felt the delicate pleasure of her quivering breath between his fingers. Grimly he smiled into her fascinated eyes. She was still motionless, too terrified, too completely dominated now, for speech or escape. Her beauty was amazing. He was mad to absorb it fully, to crush it in his grip, to enter into complete possession of it by destruction. For a moment he knew that mad fury of hopeless adoration which makes men kill the thing that they love, in sheer longing thus fully at last to possess it and make it one with themselves. In some violent action his passion must find its incarnation. Roughly he caught her beneath either cheek and forced her to his level. She stood impassive, powerless between his hands, her dimmed eyes fixed on his, her lips but an inch or so beneath his own.

‘Good, obedient girl,’ he whispered, smiling upon her. ‘She has done what she was told. Now, give your father-in-law a kiss, and go back to play.’

Then suddenly he gripped her furiously, and kissed her twice, thrice, on the lips—violent, brutal kisses that left her torn and bloodless. In his action spoke ecstatic anger only, for those kisses were not the warm or the passionate outlet of love; they were the desperate kisses of that insane hate which only kisses because it may not kill, and yet must find vent in violence for gratification of its own intensity. Then, when he had satiated the rage of his mood, he threw her roughly away, and watched, still smiling, as she staggered dizzily towards the door, and so away from the room. A new power had been born in him that day, a new terror in her. She went downstairs in the feeble dizziness of one recovering from chloroform, before whom the world floats at first like an unsubstantial phantasm. Gradually she came back into the daylight, and looked back on the dark places whence she had emerged, as on the vague horrors of a nightmare. To no one—not to her husband himself—could she bring her lips to speak of what she dimly felt herself to have seen and borne—the strange, inexorable power of flaming hatred, and the subsequent annihilation of her Self. The whole episode loomed infinitely unreal and remote as she resumed her seat in the drawing-room, and heard the wrangling voices still upraised against each other. What a gulf fixed of time between then and now! Yet they had been squabbling all the while, and in the interval she had gone down into unimaginable depths, and returned at last, battered, bruised, and shaken, into the light of earthly day. But hatred called to hatred, and deep in her heart from that hour forth lay a sullen fury against her conqueror. Should kind chance ever give him over, he should find her pitiless. Mr. Ladon had begotten for himself a bitter sorrow; for, of the wedlock between hate and hate, only misery is ever born.

Mr. Ladon's reflections took at first a livelier tone. He had conquered, he had found a sure means of subduing his

enemy. Henceforth she could offer him no opposition ; she must be his obedient slave. For many things he could use her. Then suddenly came to him the illuminating idea. For his great scheme, if all else failed, he could enforce the assistance of his powerless enemy. Then he paused. Even Mr. Ladon's malice recoiled. The punishment was too fearful. He must try every other chance first. As if to remind him of the direction in which he was to tread, the demon of anguish in his brain stirred feebly again to life. It had been slumbering, but the stormy scene through which Mr. Ladon had passed aroused the sleeper and caused it to wake in resentful vitality. It showed annoyance at having been thus disturbed, played a rapid, jangling discord on his nerves, and brought him into a cold sweat of terror lest it should fully wake and reduce his life to the blind agony of the night before. He sat paralyzed in stony immobility, counting the throbs of his brain, measuring their degree of acuteness, terrified to move lest any action should precipitate the peril and spur the demon to complete vitality. Slowly, as the minutes passed, the enemy sank to sleep again. Then, very gingerly, Mr. Ladon rose and invoked the aid of the morphia he had purchased before leaving London.

Meanwhile the Lady Lisa, who had been a disapproving witness of the scene between Tempest and Barbara, thought it time once more to assert herself. Her master was now alone, and had probably thoroughly repented of his rude and inconsiderate behaviour. Lady Lisa considered that her dignity had been sufficiently vindicated, and emerged from beneath her chair. She would show that she cherished no malice. No doubt he had acted on impulse ; now he would be delighted to be on good terms with her once more. Delicately she advanced to his chair, and gathered herself into a bunch, preparing to leap on to the knee whence his former ill-considered pettishness had so summarily depelled

her. But her charitable overtures were doomed to rejection. He was still too severely shaken, too tormented by dying anger, remorse, and terror, to be capable of friendly intercourse. With a resolute but gentle foot he put her firmly away from him.

‘Don’t worry me, Lisa,’ he said. ‘Go and look after your kittens, do.’

Thoroughly alienated, Lady Lisa sternly erected her tail and walked away towards the door, which Barbara had not had the nerve to shut on her departure.

The advice, besides its rudeness, had a further sting. For the Lady Lisa thoroughly disapproved of kittens. On everything in life that distracted attention from herself the Lady Lisa looked with cold and hostile eyes. She had not been long at Ottemer before presenting the household with children. But, after the first excitement of maternal triumph, she had realized that the kittens were not only a rival attraction, but also very much of a bore. Instead of enjoying her master’s friendship in the drawing-room, she found that she was expected to nurse her family in the house-keeper’s room. This would never do, and the Lady Lisa took decisive steps. From the first she had found her babies a nuisance; now she decided to shunt them altogether. She utterly declined to have any more to say to them accordingly, returned to her proper sphere, and left the kittens to be nursed by common cats in the kitchen. Their place, she considered, was by no means in the drawing-room, or in any company that she might at the time be honouring with her presence. Therefore, whenever she saw them approaching, she chivied them remorselessly, till at last the poor little creatures found themselves relegated to the garden and the kitchen, on pain of being severely bitten and boxed. Leaving Mr. Ladon’s room, however, after so grave a repulse, softer feelings seized her heart. She decided, on Mr. Ladon’s advice, to go and see after her

kittens, to find out what they might be doing, and, on general principles, to reprove them whatever it might be.

In any case, return into Mr. Ladon's company she would not. For the remainder of that day she held aloof, and allowed the members of the house party to conduct their amusements without the assistance of her company. Having found her children gambolling in the kitchen, she took them for a walk out of doors, and spent the afternoon and early evening playing hide-and-seek with them in the shrubberies round the house. As for the kittens, one was a timorous little beast, full of the almost savage timidity which occasionally occurs in Siamese royal cats, and seems to suggest that the long-dead King or Queen whose soul they reincarnate must have been a cowardly and unsociable individual. The other was a gay and jovial thing, very kittenish and frolicsome, with immense round eyes of the most vivid blue. His spirits were such that he had even dared to poach on his mother's territory and make friends in the drawing-room. His mother, not being able to expel him, had resigned herself to tolerating his occasional society, and even to treating him with a certain frigid amiability. In consideration of his gallant and sportive nature, he had been named the Rastaquero, and had endeared himself as such to everyone. With these two children, then, did Lady Lisa beguile the rest of the day. But as evening drew on she grew bored and hungry. Early frosts had already begun to set in among the hills of Ottemer, and she had no wish to spend the night in the open and be found frozen on a doorstep in the morning. Accordingly, she deserted her family in the middle of a game, and returned indoors to warmth and food. The timid kitten, finding the Rastaquero's play too rough, followed her example, and crept back into the kitchen. As darkness came down over the shrubberies, the Rastaquero was left playing at lions alone in the dusk, and enacting

sanguinary dramas with the lurking shadows that crouched among the laurel-stumps.

The day had passed slowly and with difficulty for the remainder of the party. Mr. Ladon did not emerge from his room at all, but sat nursing his symptoms, in an agony lest the pain should start to work once more, and triumph over the morphia with which he had tried to deaden his feelings. His son was taken up with amusing the Dean, who was disheartened by his failure to help Mr. Ladon, and sad at the spectacle of another man suffering so much and so needlessly, yet so resolutely refusing help. As for Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, she never did much more than knit or drowse. Her farthest walk was to the lawn outside the windows; her farthest flight of mind a wonder where, how, and why such people as the 'Wimbush-woman' should ever have come into existence. And, meanwhile, the Bridge-party continued to play with intervals of greater or less animosity, and a general reprobation of foggy-minded Barbara's inability to remember a single card. So the afternoon dragged through till tea-time, and so the evening until dinner-time. After dinner Lady Morland yawned fearfully, and declared that she could not keep awake another minute unless they played more Bridge.

'Goodness knows,' she complained, 'it's bad enough with Barbara about as good as a goat. But still, one must do something. What has come over you to-day, Barbara? You were all right this morning, but ever since you went to see papa-in-law you have had no more sense than your hat. Did he smack you very hard, poor Barbara, then?'

Barbara pleaded the usual headache, saw that the Dean, her husband, and his aunt, were settled, then proceeded towards the Bridge-table—the only place where she could hope to keep Lady Morland tolerably quiet and inoffensive. But Cousin Coralie protested again.

'Ugh!' she cried, with dramatic shuggings and shiver.

ings; 'not there, not there, my che-ild. For Heaven's sake, let's have the table near the fire! It's freezing like a stone outside to-night. I never felt anything like the cold. I declare, I don't know whether I have any toes or not.'

She thrust out a large flat foot, and contemplated it with grotesque wonder. Then, huddling a fluffy pink marabout closer round her ample shoulders, whence the bright purple gown seemed about to slide, she flounced with elaborate girlishness towards the big marble fireplace, where she bunched up her innumerable frills, and exposed a generous amount of stout embroidered leg to the warmth. Barbara rang, and the table was duly moved into a warmer corner. This accomplished, the four duly sat down to play.

'Now mind, Kitwankle,' prefaced Cousin Coralie, raising a plump admonitory finger, 'no tempers.'

'Oh, Tessa,' protested Miss Treves, always submissive before the game began.

However, Fate decreed that she should play with Lady Morland, so that her indignation at her partner's dishonesty was tempered by her satisfaction over their financial successes. Mr. Lancaster had various scruples as to whether a clergyman should play cards for money—scruples fostered, too, by his intense horror of losing so much as a six-pence; however, paying Bridge-debts to a Countess was a slight mitigation of the disaster, and, though pale with annoyance, he resigned himself without audible protest. As for Barbara, she neither knew nor cared which way the game might go. With the slow resurrection of her will and vital force had come a dangerous and indomitable ill-temper, too cautious and too intense to find vent in peevishness, but ever watchful for some definite work to do.

'Never, never, did I feel such a climate,' Cousin Coralie shuddered at last during a deal. 'Only September, and I shouldn't be surprised if we had snow. Do make haste, Kitwankle.' St. John, opening a shutter, informed her that

an icy sleet was falling, as disagreeable in its way as snow. Once more she shuddered histrionically. 'Not another day of this do I stand, Barbara,' she announced. 'I am sorry to put you out, and all that, but back to London Billoo and Kitwinkle and I must go. This place gives me the blue creeps as it is, and if I am going to be frozen to death as well, and catch my death of cold and be buried in the garden, it's no thank you, Barbara, and that is all. I make diamonds. I suppose you have some sort of train one can get home by. No, I don't; I make no trumps.'

This prospect for the morrow spread concealed satisfaction through the party. Nobody made any protest, though Cousin Coralie continued to apologize for the sorrow that she felt herself to be spreading through the party. The game proceeded, and one by one the others dropped off to their rooms, leaving the four players to their Bridge. Having exhausted her excuses, Cousin Coralie cheated for a while in silence. Suddenly, however, a thought occurred to her.

'How do you get on with those cats, Barbara?' she inquired.

Barbara remembered the owner of the cats, and answered briefly:

'I hate the brutes.'

'Can't you poison them or something, then?' asked her cousin lightly.

'Those dear little kitties!' ejaculated Miss Treves.

'It's rather a good idea,' answered Barbara slowly, ruminating over possibilities. 'Thank you, Tessa dear. If you only knew how I hate the horrid things!'

'And, of course, papa-in-law insists on your having 'em for ever in the room. I declare, I wouldn't be a slave to a horrid old man like that. Why, whenever he hands me so much as the salt he does it with such a nasty sneering sort of smile that I feel as if it was prussic acid. I'd stand up for my own rights a little, Barbara, I declare I would.'

As this was precisely what Barbara had proved herself unable to do, she assented warmly to the need of doing it.

'One of these days I will, Tessa,' she said. 'Mr. Ladon will have a surprise if I can ever give him one.'

The conversation lapsed for a moment while Lady Morland dealt. She dealt with a nice skill that turned as many cards as possible the wrong way up, with a more or less pleasing appearance of artlessness. What with the care that the manœuvre entailed, and the profuse apologies with which she covered it, the process of dealing required both time and silence for its accomplishment. Suddenly a faint noise was heard—a little mewing voice outside the unshuttered window.

'Talk of the devil!' exclaimed Lady Morland. 'There is one of the beasts. I suppose it wants to come in. It looks on this room quite as its own, I do believe. Well, for my part, I think they are rather jolly little animals, but I do think it is hard on you, Barbara, having to put up with them, and you hating cats as you do. I make hearts. Hadn't you better let it in, Billoo? . . . No, I don't; on second thoughts, I leave it to you, partner. Be careful, Kitwankle.'

'Stay where you are, father,' said Barbara with sudden fierceness, as Mr. Lancaster rose. 'Let it alone. I am not going to have my relations made into the cat's servants. The hateful creature will have to find its way round to the kitchen. I am not going to have it in here. Serve it right for not staying with Mr. Ladon.'

'But, Barbara——' he began.

'Let it alone, I say,' she answered.

She seemed paler than ever, and her eyes glittered. Lady Morland interposed.

'I expect the servants have gone to bed and locked everything up. The poor little beast has come round to the only lighted window it could find. Let it in, Billoo.'

'Don't I tell you to stay where you are, father?' cried Barbara feverishly.

Lady Morland's jaw dropped.

'You can't leave the creature out all night in this awful cold and sleet. It'll die, Barbara,' she protested.

'Then let it,' replied Mrs. Ladon briefly. 'Mr. Ladon must look after his own hateful animals himself. I am not going to be at their beck and call every hour of the day and night. Let it die if it wants to. It must take its own responsibility. Is nobody going to lead?'

Cousin Coralie loved warmth and comfort. She knew that all the rest of the world loves warmth and comfort, and she became very unhappy whenever she found that anybody failed to obtain them. Tears came into her eyes.

'You are a brute, Barbara!' she cried. 'It's not fair to kill the poor little cat because you are sick with Mr. Ladon. It is no fault of the cat's. I tell you it will die out there in this horrible cold. Oh, Barbara, do let us open the window. Don't be so hatefully unjust. It may be Mr. Ladon's favourite one,—what's her name?'

'Ah, that detestable brute!' replied Barbara, with pale set lips. 'I only hope it is. We loathe each other, that cat and I. Every time she comes into the room I feel the presence of an enemy. Now she must take her chances, and if she dies, well, so much the better. And Mr. Ladon can say what he likes. If he really cared for the beast he would look after it better. I don't owe him so much that I need go about slaving to make him happy. Very much the reverse, indeed—very much the reverse, Coralie, I can assure you. So let the cat stay where it is and mew. A little discomfort will be good for it, and it takes a lot more than a cold night to kill a cat. Now, do let us go on again.'

In the silence the little insistent voice was heard outside the window, shrill, protracted, piercing, filled with a thrill of terror. Lady Morland dropped her cards in a heap.

'I can't,' she said. 'Oh, Barbara, don't do this. You are mad. You aren't really so cruel. Billoo, don't take any notice of her. Go and open the window—go.'

Barbara laid her hand on his arm. Her eyes flashed, and her face was stony as that of an angry Fate.

'Father,' she said, 'this is my house, and as long as I am in it people will do as I tell them. Go on with the game, and pay no more attention to that absurd animal. What happens is nobody's concern but mine. Now play. That noise will leave off in a minute. It's a nuisance, I know, though I can't see why Tessa should make such a fuss. But before long the cat will go away and get in by some other window. If it's only that Lisa creature, what a lot of good a night in the cold will do her, hateful brute!'

Terribly torn between his allegiances to his Countess-cousin and to his hostess-daughter, Mr. Lancaster paled with anxiety. But, as Cousin Coralie, awed by Barbara's decision, made no more sign or protest, he thought himself safe in obeying his daughter. He sat down again and played. He was soon satisfied, too, as to the wisdom of Barbara's prophecies. For the little wail of despair, after a crisis of misery and a vain scratching of tiny claws on the window, died away at last into the great silence of the night outside.

'There, you see,' said Barbara, 'the creature has wandered off as I said it would.'

'I think you are rather a devil, Barbara!' said Cousin Coralie slowly, with unusual gravity.

The rest of the hand was played out in silence. On three of the party lay the oppression of their hostess's mood. She had shown them a new side to her character. At last the game was finished.

'I can't play any more,' said Lady Morland, rising. 'I feel tired—I feel wretchedly tired.' Then, before Barbara could remonstrate or interpose, she had rushed to the

window and thrown it wide. She leaned out for a moment, then recoiled, shuddering. 'Oh,' she gasped, 'it's Arctic! And here we are in the end of September, when people are picnicking all over the place in the rest of England. Oh, the cold is awful—awful!' Then, clutching her wrap more firmly round her, she leaned out and called. 'Kitty! kitty! kitty!' she screeched in penetrating, brazen tones. Nothing answered her. She called the wanderer again and again, yet still no sound rewarded her.

'Don't be an idiot, Tessa,' said Barbara, who had watched the scene with unavailing annoyance, feeling that her cousin's ridiculous conduct put her own action most unfairly in the wrong. 'You see, the cat has got in long ago by some other window. Don't stand there all night and get your death of cold. Come in and go to bed like a sane woman.'

'I suppose it is all right,' said Lady Morland doubtfully, drawing in her disordered yellow head. 'I wish I knew, though. Well, let us go. And an early train to-morrow, Barbara, mind. Not another night will I spend in this house, if I know it.'

They all left the room and went out into the long corridors, which seemed filled with blasts of icy air. The first great frost of the year had laid its hands on Ottemer.

The house for a while was filled with heavy stillness; and then, long after the inhabitants had sunk to sleep, that dreary little voice returned to the barred window, and wailed and wailed outside, far into the aching chills of the first grey dawn. But when an unclouded sun came up again over the whitened hills of Ottemer the little voice had fallen silent.

CHAPTER XVIII

ST. JOHN LADON, having seen the Dean safely bestowed, went, as usual, to bid his father good-night. This evening he had the joyous information to give of Cousin Coralie's imminent departure. But he found his father in no mood for even the best of news from the outside world. The stormy effort of the morning had, after the first flushed excitement of success, reduced Mr. Ladon to a tired and ineffectual shadow. And his enemy, finding him unbraced for defence, had been amusing itself by playing fitfully upon his nerves. The foe had awakened to no raging anger, but to a kind of placid spite that gave pain deliberately, without passion, wearing down Mr. Ladon's endurance rather than annihilating it in an overwhelming fury of assault. Tempest Ladon felt only an utter pale weariness of heart, blood-shot with occasional threads of scarlet pain. Nothing remained to him now but the chance of escaping from his slavery. Chivalry, unselfishness, decency, were all wiped from his recollection, and with no further hesitation or shame he hurried to tell his son the full extent of the service that he demanded.

St. John Ladon was staggered, went white, speechless, dazed, before the monstrousness of the thing his father proposed so calmly, with an air of suggesting the most obvious of steps.

'You are mad!' he stammered, pleading as if for pity on himself. 'Oh, father, you must be mad!'

'Yes,' replied his father slowly, 'that is what I am afraid

of. I cannot escape it. I shall be mad before long, unless you intervene. It is more than I can bear.'

'My God! what can we do? what can we do?'

'Don't I tell you what we can do? Can't you see what we have got to do? You don't want to see me dying here by inches, damnably?'

'And that . . . that *was* what you were talking of this morning? After all, it *was* that you had in your mind when you talked of services I was to render?'

'Why, yes, of course. An idiot could have seen it. But you seemed so frightened that I wanted to spare you. Now it is hopeless. I can't bear this pain any more. You will have to collect your courage and do the only thing you can to help me.'

St. John Ladon revolted in anger.

'It is monstrous!' he cried. 'Do you understand what you are asking me to do? Do you understand? It is murder, it is parricide, you are telling me to commit. And you talk as if it were a matter of putting coals on for you.'

'Ah, how hidebound you are with prejudices! Don't you see that murder now is the only mercy you can show me? Everything has changed its face.'

'Nothing can ever alter a thing like that. Murder will always be murder. Oh, I feel as if I were talking to a madman in a nightmare. These are not things one can discuss. Take your medicine, father, and go to sleep.'

'Listen, St. John. Sooner or later you will be compelled in charity to do what I ask. For God's sake, let it be sooner!'

'I will not, I tell you—never! It is unthinkable. If you want to escape that way, you must choose your own path. I am no judge of what you may or may not do. Whatever it be, you must do it for yourself.'

'But don't you understand that I cannot, St. John—I cannot?'

'And so you are trying to lay the burden on my shoulders. Why, what has come over you, father? You used to be a law to yourself. And now you are contemplating a dreadful thing, and without the courage to face it on your own responsibility. No; you are trying to slink behind me, to make me into the man of straw for your own sin. Well, your cowardice is useless, quite useless. That is all. Every man must bear his own burdens, and abide the result of his own actions. You have always taught me so yourself. What has altered your mind?'

'Pain has altered my mind, St. John; pain has wiped out all the old landmarks. So you think me a coward, do you?'

'Well, what else can I say when you beg me to commit the crime you are afraid to commit for yourself? It is damnably cowardly of you, for you know how awful it is for me to have to refuse you.'

Mr. Ladon tried entreaty.

'Don't you realize,' he pleaded piteously—'don't you realize, if I do it for myself I must be damned, St. John—damned for all eternity? There is no heaven, there is no pardon in Christianity for suicides, St. John; the Prayer-Book says so. I might escape from this agony here, but it would only be to go into another agony which would last for ever and for ever and for ever, St. John. Think of it. I should never see you again, I should never see your mother again; I should burn and burn for ever in the red places of hell.'

His son looked down at him with angry, scornful eyes.

'And so you want me to burn for ever instead of you?' he answered. 'Thank you. You are asking too great a sacrifice, I am afraid, even of a son. One's soul is one's own.'

Mr. Ladon was utterly broken. He had failed to impose his will on St. John as he had imposed it on Barbara.

'Oh, God!' he moaned, 'have I taught you everything in

vain? Don't you understand that there is no reason why you should burn? The suicide can never repent, don't you see, but the murderer *can*. And repentance carries us straight to heaven. You have only got to repent from the bottom of your heart for killing me, and then you will go to heaven just as if nothing had happened. But if I killed myself I should not be able to repent, and so I must needs be damned. Don't you see the difference? The service that I ask of you would cost you nothing—nothing at all.'

His voice took a coaxing note, and thrilled with hope. The situation was so clear, surely his son could not fail to appreciate its nicety. Between the pardonable murderer and the unpardonable suicide what an obvious gulf was fixed!

St. John Ladon grasped the doctrine, and believed it no less firmly than did his father. But it was not enough.

'No,' he answered, 'I might die before I had time. It never does to put off repentance.'

'But you could repent before you did it as well as after,' pleaded his father.

'Don't you understand how useless that would be?' rejoined the other angrily. Neither man, in his bitter earnestness, had sense to see the horrible humour of the arguments that his ingrained orthodoxy dictated. 'No, I can't do it. Anything else in reason. But you cannot ask me to go through all the rest of life under a load of remorse that I could never shake off. I should be a murderer. I might repent all day and all night, and even, perhaps, go to heaven in the end. But I should always be in hell here upon earth. A murderer and a parricide—you have no right to ask me such a thing. It is too horrible. I cannot argue with you. Every word we say seems mad and wicked. I cannot believe it is you speaking, or I listening.'

'Your selfishness is brutal,' groaned his father. 'You

always pretended to care for me as I always cared for you, and now, the first and last service I have ever really asked of you, you deny me as if it were something unholy that I wanted. I only want peace, and only you can give it me; yet you are too much of a selfish coward. I wish you were not my son. I can hardly think you are my son. No true son would deny me the only hope I have. Remorse, indeed! You might be proud all your days of having released a soul from torment.'

'I cannot think what has come over you,' said his son with a mournful sternness. 'Something has changed you utterly from the father whom I used to know. You used to be so brave and self-reliant. I would have sworn that nothing would ever have made you a coward. Yes, I must say it. I know how hateful it sounds. . . . But the things you have said—now we are only man to man. Oh, father! do think for a moment. You always taught me, about this very thing, that nothing could ever justify a man in trying to escape from the burden of pain that God has laid upon him. You used to say that a suicide was a dishonourable soldier, running from his post because his watch was heavy and unpleasant. You said that God sent pain to try a man, and that our duty was to bear all that He might choose to lay upon us. Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth—you used to tell me that agony was the finest proof of God's confidence in us. Father, don't betray that confidence now that it has been shown to you. Be brave, and bear it to the end. One hates talking of such things, but, remember, no cross, no crown.'

Somehow all these truths of Christian doctrine seemed stale and hollow homiletics to Mr. Ladon. He writhed impatiently.

'I spoke like a fool,' he answered. 'I had never felt pain. Pain is the devil's wile to tempt us into despair. It is our duty to escape from the temptation if we can.'

'And yet you are walking straight into that despair, father, and asking me to go with you.'

'Ah, St. John, it is easy to dogmatize on the educational value of pain—until one has felt it. Laws against suicide are only the jealous hatred of the happy for the wretched, of the strong for the weak. Even Christianity did not forbid suicide till the Council of Arles in the seventh century. A very doubtful council, as you know, St. John; and many of the saints were suicides, remember. Besides, no one lives up to those notions of pain as God's chosen form of trial, or why do we have chloroform and doctors? God would not allow such things to exist and be discovered, unless their use were lawful. And there is only a quite small difference of degree between unconsciousness and death. If we are permitted to induce the one, why should we be prohibited from inducing the other in a case of extremity? Oh, St. John, you must see that I am right! We must be sensible in our religion as in everything else.'

St. John Ladon passed his hand across his forehead.

'These are all damnable sophistries, father. You know it as well as I do, when you are in your right mind. Only your illness has broken you down for the moment. Suicide must always be a crime, or the Church would not have condemned it.'

'I know, I know . . . but there must be special circumstances, St. John . . . there must be exceptions to the rule.'

'Yes, and hell is full of damned souls who each thought himself destined to be the one exception to God's rules. Oh, father! don't go on darkening yourself with these blasphemous ideas. You are wanting a forbidden thing. God has sent you pain, and you must bear it faithfully to the end. It is a mark of His special favour. I know it is terrible, and I will do everything in my power to help you endure it. I will do everything that I lawfully may, God knows I will! But it is God's province alone to

release you from the pain. And no human being on earth must come between you and your trial.'

Deep emotion endowed even shy, well-guarded, St. John with rough eloquence.

'We are speaking in different languages, St. John—in different worlds,' rejoined the other. 'You are repeating like a parrot the wooden-headed nonsense I drilled into you before this illness taught me better. Sometimes I almost believe the Dean was right, and that rules lose their value with their elasticity. Anyhow, I know that what you say is nothing but pharisaical selfishness. I taught it you myself, and now I am punished.'

St. John, fairly embarked on this repulsive discussion, emboldened himself to defend his convictions to the end. 'And what I know,' he answered, 'is that right is right, and wrong is wrong; and you know the truth as well as I do, through your own teaching. But pain has possessed you, like a devil.'

'You make your God a fool,' replied his father bitterly. 'If God is omnipotent in the making of laws, He must also be omnipotent in the breaking of laws. But you make Him a sort of narrow-minded martinet Colonel—the slave of His own Book of Regulations. If He forces us to suicide, He must pardon suicide.'

St. John Ladon's undemonstrative piety was stirred to its depths by this blasphemous attribution of common-sense to the Creator.

'I cannot talk to you any more,' he replied with feeling, 'while you say such impossible things. You are not yourself. It is always the sinner's dodge to throw responsibility on the Almighty. What about free-will? But it is useless to argue with you in your present mood. If you can justify suicide, show by your own action that you believe your justification. I have nothing to say against that. All I do say is that you will not succeed in your attempt to make a mur-

derer of me ; your attempt simply shows that, after all, you do not really believe what you say yourself—you are afraid of the judgment. You cannot get over that. And now, good-night.'

Tempest Ladon laughed a little. 'What a dialogue between father and son!' he said. 'This is what comes of discussing realities and actual problems with one's nearest and dearest. Away go all conventionalities and respect for relationships, until the son is teaching the father his catechism. Our conversation seems like something in a nightmare, as you say, or in some damnably realistic comedy. I can hardly believe it myself, any more than you can. Well, you refuse me. You are going to let me sink or swim. That is quite clear. You have shown me what a narrow, pedantic fool I have begotten. So now you can leave me.'

'Good-night,' said St. John Ladon reprovingly as he turned away. But at the door he stopped. 'I hate going like this,' he cried—'it is horrible to go like this! Oh, father, do forgive me for saying what I have! In the morning you will see that I was right. You must not do this thing, and you must not expect anyone else to do it for you either. I know you will feel the cowardice of it as strongly as I do, as soon as you have had a good night's rest.'

But his father had given up all hope from this quarter, and avenged his repulse with bitterness. Now, he must use his reserved weapon, and it would punish St. John, too.

'Many thanks,' he said. 'It will need a very long night's rest indeed to cure me. Mercifully, there is someone else to whom I can turn, since you are afraid to help me. You are not the only person who can give me that eternal sleeping draught.'

There fell a silence. The snarling malice in his father's tone frightened St. John with the nameless dread of some

new complication. He came back towards the chair in which Mr. Ladon was reclining, exhausted.

'What do you mean?' he asked. 'I do not understand you. Please tell me what you mean, father—tell me at once.'

Mr. Ladon opened gleaming blue eyes. 'What do you think?' He smiled. 'Amuse yourself with guessing. Your mind is so entirely in the confidence of Heaven that I don't fancy you will have any difficulty in unravelling *my* poor little concerns.'

'Explain yourself,' said St. John sharply. 'I must know what you mean. Let us have no more of these hints and mysteries.'

'Do you really wish to know?' murmured Mr. Ladon. Then I will tell you. I do not doubt that, when Barbara hears of the difficulty I am in, she will wish to help her unfortunate father-in-law in any way she can. I have very little doubt that I shall be able to persuade her into doing what you are afraid to do—very little doubt indeed.' He smiled to himself, then continued: 'Whether such a revelation and such a task are exactly suited to a young woman of her age and circumstances is no concern of mine. My only concern is to secure my release by any means in my power. If my son cannot bear the responsibility, then, of course, it devolves upon my daughter-in-law. Let us trust that she will take no harm. It would be very sad if her nerves proved to be as weak as her husband's.'

A short pause followed. The gentle, intolerably soft utterance had flowed so smoothly through its hearer's ears that for a moment it seemed impossible to believe the whole venomous meaning that it bore. The very low-toned suavity of his father's intonation seemed to St. John to enhance the already incomprehensible horror of what he was saying. The younger man stood fixed in amazement, then spoke.

'You are a devil,' he said in a broken voice. 'Do you

know what you have been saying? I pray God you do not know it. Oh, you are not responsible. You cannot be!

'Responsible or not,' replied the other, 'I mean to turn for help to Barbara. She will not deny me.'

St. John took a step nearer to his father, and firmness came back into his voice.

'Look here,' he said, 'do not force me to say hateful things. I have held myself in so far as much as I could—'

'Your tenderness has been lovely,' whispered his father, still ominously smiling.

'Listen! Don't mock me. You can say what you like about me, but you are to leave my wife alone. I will not have her made miserable by your notions. Do you hear me? Not one word of all this to Barbara. Good God, remember that she is only a bride! You must know what a damnable thing you are doing.'

'Yours is the responsibility, St. John. If you will do for me what I ask, then obviously your Barbara will escape all inconveniences. But, if you refuse me your help, then equally obviously I must turn to some other ally. And I am pretty confident of being able to secure dear Barbara's help in my project. She is not strong-willed, you see, and I am. Her sufferings in the matter are a consideration for yourself alone, since you can so easily spare her. They have nothing to do with me. Pray consider the situation.'

'Damn it all!' stammered the other, reckless in his desperate rage, 'can *nothing* turn you into a gentleman again? Oh, it is no use talking to you, I see. You have always hated my wife, and done your best to make us both wretched. And now, because you are a coward, you are going to use your advantage, are you, to torture an innocent girl? Do what you like, then, but you are not going to bribe me into becoming your murderer, and I do not think you will succeed in bribing her, either. I imagine I shall be able to get the first word in with my wife.'

'Your behaviour is both polished and filial,' murmured Mr. Ladon. 'I might have known what would come of your marrying a Miss—what was it? Suppose you put some coals on for a change, instead of continuing to abuse your father at your wife's dictation. The night is as cold as your charity. I can hear Barbara in every word you say.'

The heat of St. John's anger died down for a moment. His father, once so stalwart and impressive, now looked frail and broken.

'Oh, please don't hate Barbara quite so much,' he pleaded. 'What has she done to you besides marrying me? I know you do not really want to hurt her, father. You frightened me so horribly for a moment that I lost my head. It would be a devil's trick to tell all this to Barbara, now wouldn't it? You were only frightening me as a punishment, because I could not do what you wanted.'

A gleam came into Mr. Ladon's eyes.

'Does that mean that you will obey me?' he asked.

'Oh, father, you know I cannot! It is an abominable thing you have been asking me.'

'Then I am afraid nothing can save Barbara from being let into the secret,' murmured Mr. Ladon inexorably.

St. John flushed.

'Very well,' he said briefly; 'I see you are determined, and so am I. Even if Barbara is to hear your story, I will take care she is not worried by it.'

'Have you a recipe for communicating your own narrow-minded cruelty to your wife,' said Mr. Ladon softly, 'or how are you to prevent my story from harrowing her feelings?'

'That is my concern, not yours,' said the other shortly. 'If you insist on behaving like my enemy, you shall certainly be treated as such.'

'I am no enemy of you or yours,' cried Mr. Ladon; 'I am your father, St. John. I have always done everything

in my power to make you happy, and now I only ask you to do as much for me.'

'Everything that lies in my power of course I will do, and you know it,' rejoined his son; 'but what is beyond our power neither Barbara nor I will do for you.'

'You have given me your answer,' replied Mr. Ladon, relapsing into dull wrath; 'now it only remains to find out what Barbara's answer will be.'

'Can you really mean to tell me that you intend to tell this whole hideous business to my wife—that you intend asking a young girl to kill you, just because you are too weak either to bear your lot or to escape from it on your own responsibility? Let us have it clearly: do you understand what you are doing, and do you, all the same, persist in your intention to do it?'

'To be perfectly definite, that is precisely what I intend to do, unless, indeed, you think better of your own weak terrors.'

'Thank you,' answered St. John; 'now I know what to do.'

He turned abruptly after his last, quietly-spoken words, and left the room.

'You might at least have had the courtesy to wish your father good-night,' protested Mr. Ladon, as the door closed sharply behind his son. He was left alone to digest his failure, to ponder his son's indignation, and to wonder how he proposed to render Barbara immune against the poisonous communication that awaited her on the morrow. Mr. Ladon by now had lost sight of any cruelty or injustice lurking in his plan. He had no immediate malice against Barbara, and wished her neither harm nor sorrow; only she had become a necessary pawn in his game, and the need was strong upon him to draw her into action. He wondered angrily at his son's weak selfishness in denying him all help, either from his own hands or his wife's. St. John might, at a pinch, have refused his father's prayer; but he

had no shadow of a right to prevent his father from appealing to Barbara as a second resource. Mr. Ladon saw himself environed by unreasonable egoism, and felt righteously incensed. And how did St. John propose to deafen Barbara to her father-in-law's request?

St. John Ladon hurried to his wife's room. He felt that he must lose no time in preparing her against the danger that was lurking in her path. He was ready, in his sense of instant peril, to awake her even from sleep. It seemed to him that the man he had left behind, so pale and exhausted, in his father's room, was no kinsman, but a malignant stranger who, by some strange magic, had taken his father's place, and was now eager to bring shame and misery on every member of the Ladon family. St. John had never formulated his own notions on demoniacal possession, but in some dim way he felt very sure that the body that once had contained his father was now tenanted by a pitiless devil. At any costs Barbara must be saved from the unhappiness and the terrible responsibility that the fiend so callously meant to lay upon her bending shoulders. By the morning, perhaps, the peril might be passed, and his father restored to his own senses again; but, for fear this should not be so, he must lose no time in arming his wife against the enemy.

Luckily, he had no need to awake his wife, for he found her sitting crouched over a dying fire in a mood of dreary meditation. For a few moments he made preparatory small-talk. Barbara, who had been considering matters with an intense and cold self-dissatisfaction, greeted his efforts with some indifference.

'I have been seeing my father,' said St. John at last, with elaborate nonchalance. Whatever happened, he would not frighten Barbara by revealing the whole horror of that scene he had just endured.

'Have you?' she answered, without emotion.

'And I wanted to speak to you about him,' went on her husband.

Barbara looked up with a return of vitality.

'It is no use asking me to lick his boots any more than I do,' she protested. 'Heaven knows I do all I can, but you must admit that he makes things as hard for me as possible.'

Here was a flung cord. St. John grasped it.

'I am afraid,' he began slowly,—'I am afraid, Barbara, you are right and I was wrong about my father. I don't like telling you, but I am beginning to see that he hates us both.'

'Why, what has he been saying and doing now?' inquired Barbara with some interest.

'To-night he is very bitter,' went on her husband, 'and, in fact, I do not think he can be quite himself. He has got hold of a horrible plan for frightening you, Barbara, and making you unhappy. He tried it on me first, and when it failed, he told me quite openly that he meant to use it on you. So I thought you had better be warned.'

'How clever and exciting of him!' answered Barbara languidly. 'Tell me what the wonderful plan is, St. John.'

'Only he will try to pretend that he has got some dreadful mortal complaint,' replied St. John, inspired by love with unwonted and unnatural cunning. 'He will frighten you with all kinds of details and that sort of thing; and then, to wind up with, he will do everything he can to persuade you to put him out of his misery with opium or morphia or some sort of poison. But don't you listen to a word he says. It will be all a pretence and a sham, just put on to terrify you and make you miserable.'

'How extraordinarily melodramatic!' laughed Barbara. 'I never thought he was clever enough to invent a scheme like that. It is a good thing you told me, though. I might have believed him and been worried. I might even have

ended by offering him what he wanted, perhaps. Then, how he would have laughed at me! And yet, you know, I don't believe in letting people die by inches of incurable diseases. We put animals out of their misery, so I don't see why we should not do the same good turn to human beings, if there is no other way.'

'You don't really mean that, Barbara,' said her husband. 'You could not do it when it came to the point.'

'No, I suppose not,' she answered slowly. 'I should be terrified. Yes, I should be frightened of being a murderess and seeing ghosts. I am a fool about believing that kind of thing, and I know my nerves would soon begin to play me tricks. Oh, I am awfully glad you saved me from being taken in, St. John dear. I hate being laughed at. Does he act his part well, St. John?'

'So well that, unless I had told you, I believe you might have been taken in,' replied St. John, warming to his own part. 'He took me in for a moment.'

'And I, who always believe people,' laughed Barbara—'it is so much easier. What you have saved me from, St. John! I suppose he will be very piteous, and tell me all kinds of horrible imaginary details about his symptoms? Well, this time I shall have the laugh of him, thanks to you. How astonished he will be when I smile gently and refuse to believe a word of his story! Seriously, though, this is rather a horrible thing for him to do. I wish he did not hate me so much. To think of inventing all these lies simply to make me miserable. I can hardly realize that he meant it in earnest. It seems just a joke. And yet, if you had not told me, it would have turned out a dreadful piece of humiliating cruelty. St. John, I hardly feel safe in the house with him. I believe he would stick at nothing to hurt me.'

She was pale with alarm. He comforted her.

'Never mind,' he said; 'don't listen to a word he says,

and remember I am always there to stand by you. Never let him have the satisfaction of knowing that his spiteful lies have power to hurt you. You have only to laugh at all he says ; that will be enough.'

She was satisfied at last, and secure in her foreknowledge of the plot. Mr. Ladon was forestalled

CHAPTER XIX

‘How very amusing you are!’ said Barbara, looking into Mr. Ladon’s eyes with candid gaiety.

His jaw dropped. The scene was not playing as he had planned it.

‘Amusing?’ inquired Mr. Ladon.

‘Oh, yes,’ cried his daughter-in-law, openly laughing at him. ‘You do it so well, you know. You look as sober as a judge. It is enough to take anyone in.’

Most people, when entreating relief against a mortal and singularly painful complaint, might, not unreasonably, look grave as a judge. The occasion seemed a singular one for Barbara’s merriment.

‘I tell you,’ he went on, endeavouring to recall her to a sense of fitness—‘I tell you that I must have your help, Barbara. You cannot understand what I suffer. Even you would be sorry for me if you could.’

‘How very delightful you are!’ exclaimed Barbara, rippling with gentle mirth.

‘What do you mean?’ he replied, beginning to feel ruffled. ‘I must say, Barbara, that you receive my news in a most grotesque and unbecoming way. Have you no sense of decency or humanity at all?’

‘What can you expect of Blackpool?’ suggested Barbara languidly. ‘You have so often told me that I am beyond the pale, you know.’

Mr. Ladon thought he saw light.

‘Naturally, one must not expect too much of people who have had no education,’ he began, with the air of one making a handsome apology, ‘but still, a little common human feeling is common to every class of life. If this is your revenge, Barbara, because I have sometimes tried to mend your manners, all I can say is that it is both excessive and ill bred. I cannot believe that you are as callous as you pretend to be.’

‘How nice to be thought so well of!’ said Barbara. ‘You must not make me too proud, though.’

He had, of course, been expecting pity, horror, every kind of suitable and agonized emotion. Therefore, to be confronted with this genial and unruffled flippancy wrought upon him like madness.

‘Don’t you understand, Barbara?’ he protested. ‘What has come over you? Are you in your senses?’

She smiled at him.

‘Perfectly,’ she replied.

‘Then . . . is this all you have to say to me?’

‘Not quite,’ said his enemy, turning suddenly upon him with gleaming eyes. ‘Would you like to hear some more? Then I think you rather a cruel old coward, to try and play such a game with me. I know you hate me—you have always hated me—but I thought you wanted to be more or less of a gentleman all the same. However, now you are playing a cad’s trick, only, luckily, you are not going to get anything by it. I know you too well, thanks, so you had better drop this.’

For a moment Mr. Ladon sat speechless. Not to be pitied by this brazen creature was bad, but to be thus turned upon, rent and trampled, changed the conversation into nightmare. Was she insane? Was he sound of hearing? Had his disease begun to induce hallucinations? Surely most people, on hearing such a tale as his, might have been expected to show some commiseration? But, even

if they were flinty enough to refuse this, was it probable that they would immediately have set themselves to abuse a dying man like a pickpocket?

'Is it possible,' he began at last in doubtful tones—'is it possible, Barbara, that you do not believe what I have been telling you?'

'Of course not,' replied Barbara airily. 'But you are a first-rate actor, that I will say for you. If I did not know you so well, I declare you might have taken me in.'

'On my honour, I tell you, Barbara—I swear to you——'

'That's quite enough, Mr. Ladon. A game is a game, but I hope you don't want to commit perjury about it. You have failed utterly. The best thing you can do is to try something else, instead of making matters worse.'

'So you won't believe me?' he stuttered, almost helpless with wrath.

'What a fool you would think me if I did!' she answered, smiling genially, all her serenity restored. 'And now I hear the carriage. We must go and say good-bye to the Dean. Let us be friends for a minute, shall we? And you can be devising some other trick to play on me afterwards, if you like.'

'But you must think me a perfect devil,' he protested, 'if you really believe that I have been lying to you all the time for fun.'

'Oh, I do,' replied Barbara calmly; 'not a very wise devil, either. But as you have not succeeded in doing me any harm, I don't see the use of storming and scolding, do you? Now I know what you really are, and what I have got to expect: that is all the difference this scene has made, which, I suppose, is rather a gain for me.'

'Then it is quite useless to——'

'Oh dear me, yes. Only a bad player keeps up a lost game. You had much better drop this nonsense and come along.'

In a sort of dumb helplessness Mr. Ladon followed his

daughter-in-law from the room. She had won the battle, but by the use of most unexpected weapons. Mr. Ladon could not make things out. Surely her inhuman effrontery could not be genuine. It was impossible that any woman, even Barbara, could be so obstinately cynical and cruel. Sooner or later she would come to his assistance and pity him effectually, as his own son had refused to do. As his egoism grew more intense with the progress of his disease, he had come to see himself the centre, not only of his own, but of everyone else's world. It never struck him that Barbara could have any reason for not regarding him with proper filial sympathy. He had taken it for granted that, when her brain was clear of delusions, she would ask nothing better of life than to come to her father-in-law's assistance. Forgetful of everything that she had suffered at his hands, he had rested serene in his confidence that she would be eager to serve him, at any cost of her own peace and quiet. Now he saw that he must despair of her willing help. Very well, then ; he must force her to help him, even unwilling.

The Dean was departing. Already Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth stood, muffled in shawls, upon the doorstep. Barbara, very stately and beautiful, was bidding her farewell. Cousin Coralie had already fled with her contingent of visitors, and the recollection of her scented presence now stood like a ghost between hostess and departing guest. Every curve of Aunt Blanda's placid figure seemed inspired with gentle disapproval. Barbara turned to salute the Dean, whom she had always found more sympathetic than his wife, though rather alarming. The Dean was now saying farewell to Mr. Ladon, for whom he had been waiting at the top of the hall.

It was with depression that he left Ottemer. He was full of pain for all he left behind him. And yet he had been quite unable to give help, or, rather, his help had been useless, no help at all. It was not often that he found himself thus

ineffectual. Several times in his life before had he had to deal with men confronted with the same terrible difficulty by which Mr. Ladon now found himself baffled. Some of these men had been religious in the narrower, doctrinal sense of the word; all had necessarily been men who thought much, and more or less deeply, of the matter in hand. But conscience had never yet, in the Dean's experience, proved superior to common-sense. Even the most devout of the doomed had mustered up desperate courage enough to trust rather in God's mercy than in the stringent pronouncements of a creed. The Dean's part had always been to give the sufferers peace in their decision. A great ache of pity filled his heart for Mr. Ladon, imprisoned in torment by a too obstinate belief in a few formulæ, ill-defined and worse expressed by a bygone and unmetaphysical age. And yet nothing could be done. Tempest Ladon, having morbidly soaked himself for so many years in undiluted orthodoxy, now found himself immune against any inoculation of direct and obvious reason. The one manly way out of his peril was for ever closed against him by his own habit of mind. The Dean saw nothing else in store for his brother-in-law but an ever-weakening battle with torment, complicated by desperate efforts to devise another method of escape—a method of escape by sacrificing the peace of others, to secure for himself that peace which his religion would not allow him the courage to obtain with his own hands. The Dean parted from Mr. Ladon with the feeling of one who has watched another drowning alone in bitter waters, while powerless himself to lend hand or help.

‘I wish you well, Tempest,’ said the Dean.

‘You are the only person in the world who does,’ replied the other; ‘and you may spare yourself the trouble. I return your good office, though. I wish you well in soul, Philip. Read your Thirty-nine Articles again, and your

Creeds, Philip. At present you are a hireling, and no true shepherd.'

'What does it matter about the shepherd, Tempest, so long as the sheep are kept well and safe? However, it is time to say good-bye.'

'I think, after all, I am sorry to lose you, Philip. I am glad you came.'

'A most delightful little visit,' said Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth, in a gentle voice that neither believed its own words, nor asked anyone else to do so. 'So kind of you to ask us, Barbara dear. And your aunt a most lively person. Oh, your cousin—yes. Philip, are you coming? It would never do to miss the train.'

Having shed an air of perfunctoriness over her gratitude and her farewells, Mrs. Gordon-Wentworth laid unresponsive lips to the cheek that Barbara inclined towards her, and then bundled herself into the carriage. The Dean paused on his way, to address Mrs. Ladon. After the usual thanks, he held her hand for another moment.

'My dear Barbara,' he said in a low voice, 'be very gentle with your father-in-law, even if he seem harsh to you at times. He has more to bear than you have any idea of.'

'More to bear?' she repeated, looking at him with startled eyes.

'Until he tells you, I must keep his secret, Barbara. But remember that when people seem ill-tempered and malicious, it generally means that they are only miserable and desperate. You cannot help him except by making his life as easy as you can. I am sure you will do that.'

'But—is it serious?' she asked in an awe-stricken voice.

'As serious as life and death. The heart only knoweth its own bitterness. But sometimes we can guess, and then our anger is softened. Usually we only understand too

late ; but I have put it into your power to understand in time—at least to understand in part. And now good-bye.'

With a last look into her eyes he turned to join his wife, who was now protesting softly that the train would certainly be missed. Another instant, and the carriage rolled away. Barbara stood transfixed, waving an unconscious hand. Her whole thought was set on the Dean's words. Was everybody in a league to lie ? Or, if not, who had spoken the truth—her husband, her father-in-law, or the Dean ? Was it possible that Mr. Ladon had not been acting, not been lying ; that he had seriously appealed to her for help against a mortal peril, and that the story she had laughed away so insolently was, after all, a real and ghastly truth ? She blushed hotly at the memory of her words, and turned towards her father-in-law in a quick impulse to make amends. But his attention was engaged by the butler, who seemed to be telling him something of importance — something that apparently necessitated a dropped voice and a funereal manner. Barbara hurried towards them.

'Shut out all night,' Mr. Ladon was saying. 'But how can that have happened?'

'I'm sure I cannot say, sir. He was found outside the drawing-room window this morning. Quite stiff, sir.'

'But last night there were people in the drawing-room. How was it they did not hear him ? He must have scratched and mewed at the window, poor little beast, for hours. . . . Barbara, you were playing cards in the drawing-room till any hour of last night or this morning, I am told. It appears that the kitten got shut out, and the servants found it dead and frozen this morning outside the drawing-room. Did you hear nothing last night while you were playing ? But, of course, you would have let him in if you had.'

Under the sudden attack Barbara completely lost her head, and spoke the truth.

'Oh yes,' she began, 'I heard him. I mean . . . I did not think——'

Her senses gave out as she realized what she had admitted. She stammered, and collapsed into a scarlet silence. Mr. Ladon fixed his eyes upon her, and said no word. An hour seemed to drag slowly by, then those terrible eyes were removed.

'That will do, Barclay,' said Mr. Ladon quietly. 'See that the kitten is buried in the animals' corner. You can go now.' The butler softly retired, and Mr. Ladon turned once more upon his daughter-in-law. 'This is interesting,' he said very gently; 'let us go into things a little. Last night there was a very severe frost, as you knew, and yet you heard the kitten—my kitten—crying at the window to be let in, without moving hand or foot to save it. No doubt you were too much absorbed in your game?'

'No, not exactly—yes—that is, yes!' stammered Barbara wretchedly.

'You are surely indefinite. Pray help me to understand. You knew that the cold was dangerous; you knew that the kitten was shut out; you were not so completely absorbed in your game as not to know what was happening. And yet you did nothing?'

'Let me explain,' began Barbara impulsively. 'We thought it would get in somewhere else.'

'But I gathered that you knew all the servants were in bed, and the house locked for the night? Otherwise one of them would have heard it, and it would have been let in. You must admit that all this happened very late—after everyone else was in bed?'

'Yes, but I thought—oh, I never thought that a night in the open would do it any harm. Please believe me, I never meant any harm.'

'Ah, you realized, then, what you were doing. Had you an idea that a young and very delicate kitten would enjoy

six hours or so of keen frost on a Yorkshire moor? Did you think the kitten would enjoy a night out? Your tastes in amusement are curious. Now, I myself would hardly have turned a Dissenter out of doors last night.'

'No, it was not that exactly; I never thought——'

Barbara broke off in confusion, trying hard to collect herself and pull some sort of excuse into shape. But Mr. Ladon pressed her without mercy, watching her with acute, cold eyes.

'Then you did not shut the kitten out to give it pleasure. Possibly you did it to give the kitten pain, eh? Had you any particular reason to dislike the poor little beast, may I ask?'

'You can't think me such a brute,' protested Barbara with fire.

'We neither of us seem to have a very high opinion of the other, have we?' whispered Mr. Ladon with a sardonic smile.

'Oh, I cannot tell you how sorry I am——'

'Pray don't take the trouble. As you so justly said, only a very bad player tries to keep up a lost game by lying. Your motives are both obvious and admirable. You knew the kitten belonged to me; you knew I was fond of it. You could not touch me, but you thought you could hurt me through the kitten; so you shut it out in the cold, and hoped to punish me by being cruel to one of my very few friends. You were unable to wreak your dislike on me personally, so you satisfied it indirectly on the innocent and helpless, as soon as they fell into your power. All you did you did to give me pain. If I am wrong, why don't you say so?' Barbara could find no words. After a pause Mr. Ladon continued in a tired voice: 'I am too much broken down to deny you the satisfaction you have worked for so hard,' he said. 'Yes, you have succeeded in hurting me almost more, perhaps, than you may have meant, though I doubt it.'

He was beyond reach of appeal now, fixed thenceforth in a merciless frenzy of justified hate.

‘Oh, I cannot bear this,’ cried Barbara—‘I cannot bear it! I know I have been all wrong, I know I have behaved abominably. I wish you would let me explain. Really, *really*, I have not been so hateful as you think—really.’

‘No,’ he answered with soft intensity. ‘I dare not fancy you *could* be as hateful as I think you. But you do your best, certainly, to rise to my opinion of you. My dear Barbara, don’t indulge in the foolish weakness of protestation. It is a cheap dodge, to achieve your vendettas, and then pretend to be lavishly repentant. In fact, as your distinguished cousin, Lady Morland, would say, it won’t wash. But you will not add insult to injury by expecting me to believe you when you say you are sorry, surely? No, no; everything you did was done with the most skilful forethought, I am certain.’

Barbara stood before her tormentor white and helpless. The icy words whistled sharply past her ears like a spiteful sleet. She had neither defence nor excuse to offer. On every side she was bewildered and silenced by the result of her own misdoing. Her enemy devoted a monstrous malice to the exaggeration of her faults, yet everything he laid to her charge, however horribly magnified, was nevertheless a distorted truth. With clasped hands she stood before him, swaying in the storm of his rage.

‘It has all worked so beautifully together,’ he was saying. ‘And I came to you for pity! Now I understand why you would not believe me. It was another detail in your revenge, evidently. You are so much less scrupulous than I had thought. It was a brilliant idea to strike at me through one of my pets, through a helpless creature that could do nothing to thwart your little plan. I should never have thought of such a thing myself, though you complimented me on my ready invention of hostile manœuvres. After

what has happened I value your compliments highly, do you know, as the professional's tribute to an amateur.'

'Please let me go,' said Barbara.

'Yes,' he replied. 'Go to your room and think over some new trick to play me. I still have a son, and some more pets for you to try your hand on. As long as you succeed in hurting me your end will have been gained. You are such a strong-minded woman. Some people, you know, are so squeamish that they would not like to torture an animal to death simply to annoy an enemy. When I told you of my illness and my despair, how you reproved me! how you pointed out the cowardice and dishonesty of inventing such tales to terrify a helpless and harmless young woman! You pretended to disbelieve me with such an air, such indignant honesty, and then, on your hypocritical disbelief, you built me up such a sermon of righteousness and nobility that I was quite blinded, quite silenced, almost deafened. Oh, you are very wonderful. Nothing comes amiss for your schemes, and you are never troubled by any prejudices in the way of kindness or honour or good-feeling. My son is to be congratulated on his wife. Go and tell him I said so. . . . I wonder if he is your partner in these little games. Not yet, perhaps . . . but you will break him in soon—you will break him into your ways.'

'Oh, my God!' moaned Barbara, 'how awfully you hate me! What *can* I say to you?'

'Hate you?' He smiled. 'But surely that was the object of your proceedings? Surely you wanted to be hated? I can tell you you have thoroughly succeeded in your object—oh yes, thoroughly. You have helped to make me sorry that ever I was born. Now, be very certain I will do as much for you—as much, and more also,' he concluded, his smile breaking into a malignant grin.

The light of an almost insane hate filled his eyes, and, had the capacity of terror remained alive within her at that

moment, alone with the madman, she might have stood in terror almost of her life. But murders and melodramas are far from even our wildest thoughts. We may rapturously think of killing, but the joy rarely swims into the sphere of practical life. Nowadays the desire to do murder resolves itself into a determination not to take our enemy's life, but to make it a burden to him. The method is more subtle and less untidy, while being a great deal more satisfactory and effective. In a moment Mr. Ladon cooled. The woman before him had been scolded into stupefaction. It would be wasted labour to expend any more energetic spite on this staggering white creature who stood in front of him, staring in a stupid, lifeless way that gave her tormentor no sort of satisfaction.

'Go, my dear,' he murmured softly, with a pleasant smile— 'go now, and rest. You are looking tired. Perhaps I bore you? In any case, you will do well to get some rest while you can, for I shall have plenty more to say to you by-and-by. And I imagine—— Well, well, we will talk it over later at more length. At present you look quite faint. Let me advise a little brandy. And so, farewell for the moment.'

With a bow he turned from her, and passed along the corridor towards the stairway, staggering drunkenly as he went. From that moment her punishment was determined.

Barbara stood for a while looking after him with expressionless eyes, then she wandered slowly out towards the garden, trying to realize what she had heard, what had happened, in what mesh of hatred she had thus suddenly been enveloped. An avalanche seemed to have descended on her without warning, half stunning her in its descent, and obliterating all the ordinary features of life. Fragments of words and sentences still hummed in her ears, conveying nothing definite beyond the general consciousness of an inextinguishable rage. The world seemed suddenly to have

changed. The face that had smiled so smoothly yet so sourly into hers was now proved to be a mask. In a moment of time it had been stripped away, revealing a grin of wolfish malignance. The commonplace strained relations between father-in-law and daughter-in-law had changed in a twinkling to the fury of an internecine strife. Hideous things lurked in the darkness ahead.

CHAPTER XX

BLESSED are they to whom life presents itself as a picture in sharp blacks and whites, with no tiresome intermediate shades in grey. Such happy ones form a mighty army, and for them the course of existence is wonderfully simplified and made smooth. They are not distracted by the perception of faults in a saint, or of piteousness in the sinner. The good, to them, are all white; the bad, all scarlet. Action, also, is, for them, divided rigidly into right and wrong, with no befogging thought of circumstance or motive, personality or training. They are never at fault for a judgment, never need hesitate to pronounce a damning verdict. They decide unalterably by consideration of the bald fact which is always so simple, and, like a jury of Englishmen good and true, analyze a sin as a mere action, without yielding to the weakness of a Frenchman, who is swayed by feeling to look upon a crime, not as a mere fact, but as a series of causes and effects, for whose complete comprehension a deep consideration of motive and emotion are necessary. It was a Frenchman who found out that 'tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner'; your man of solid sense has neither power nor wish either to understand or to pardon. To see a sin is enough for him. It is a sin; it must be punished. That is sufficient. He has no concern with its origin, the person who engendered it, the distraction of the person who committed it; the bare, hard fact is all he asks to see. And thus the judgments of the sensible man are brief and easy; his life is simple, plain, obvious. He is spared all

the complicated worries that beset unlucky people who try to understand their world. Surely a good deal of stupidity, a great deal of intolerance, an almost incredible amount of wooden-heartedness are not too heavy a price for the average man to pay for his blessed privilege of being able to live through life without the inconvenient disturbances of thought, intelligence, or sympathy.

To the large and happy army of the unreflecting belonged St. John Ladon. He was very sorry for his father—truly horrified—when he thought of the fate that had overtaken him, but it never occurred to him to weigh his father's sufferings against his father's transgression. The two considerations belonged to two entirely different compartments of his brain, and the one was to be allowed no sort of communication with the other. It was dreadful that people should be in pain; but no amount of pain could make right wrong, or alter the truth that it is unpardonable to behave like a cad. To explain is not to excuse; suffering could not possibly have anything to do with a lapse from breeding. St. John Ladon preserved unmixed sorrow for his father's suffering and unmixed horror at his father's conduct. To threaten Barbara—monstrous! The action of no man—of no gentleman. All this was disastrously obvious and true. But St. John failed to see that a human being dying in mortal pain is often in danger of becoming less than man, if jealousy and anger come to the reinforcement of an already sufficiently effective physical torment. That his father, alone and helpless, on the verge of the bottomless pit, which is despair, could be resolved into a mere cyclone of emotions, restrained by no considerations of morality or tradition, never for a moment occurred to the younger man, so serene in his confidence that, whatever happened, a gentleman would always remain a gentleman, and that nothing on earth could either explain or excuse the violation of a gentleman's code. For what other influence has an emotion

except over the direct action it governs? To a man of St. John Ladon's type, a given action is the sole offspring of a given thought; it never occurs to him that one thought, besides its legitimate offspring, may have a hundred bastard children in other mansions of the mind, and that no action stands sole, but ramifies directly and indirectly through every district of the being, till the soul becomes as a roaring loom of many threads, where no strand can be touched without at once involving half a hundred others. All such ideas would have been strange and rather dreadful to St. John Ladon. Pity for one thing and reproof for another he kept in two separate boxes of his consciousness, not dreaming that they should be inseparably mixed, as the actions that give rise to them are inseparably mixed. A new idea had come to him in his father's case, and in its train brought a dim terror that required instant extinction, without consideration of his anger or his compassion.

When Mr. Ladon arrived at last in his room after the interview with Barbara, he found his son awaiting him in some anxiety.

'I wanted to speak to you,' said St. John.

Mr. Ladon, at the bottom of his heart, had begun to realize that Barbara's incredulity had sprung from some other cause than mere diabolical malice. He recognised her behaviour as the result of the manœuvre that St. John had threatened overnight. He had evidently had the first word with his wife, and had forewarned her falsely that every word she might hear from her father-in-law next day would be a heartless lie, devised for the sole purpose of putting her to shame and terror. That had been his scheme, and well it had succeeded. Mr. Ladon would not let this discovery mollify his heart towards Barbara; but with characteristic inconsistency he now involved St. John in the condemnation that liars deserve, yet without absolving the innocent victim of the deception. Barbara should not

only be made the instrument of his release, but also of her own damnation: that was the penalty he had pronounced upon her, and nothing should commute it. He looked at his son meanwhile with eyes of deadly hostility, seeing in him nothing but an unscrupulous enemy.

‘Certainly,’ he answered. ‘I am at your service, St. John.’

St. John was completely absorbed in his own concerns. His question was, for him, the one important matter in the world.

‘I wanted to know,’ he said, tempering respect with disapproval, ‘about this disease of yours. . . . Is it hereditary or no?’

The idea had not lately occurred to Mr. Ladon, also well occupied with his own affairs. Now it struck him with force. But his son's manner was neither friendly, conciliating, nor appealing. The father and son had moved very far apart, and Mr. Ladon was in no mood for mercy or palliations.

‘Most probably, my son,’ he answered gently.

St. John Ladon paled. He had the average sportsman's intensely contemptuous horror of illness and pain. The notion that such things could ever be in store for him was almost too grotesquely monstrous to be borne. He could not reconcile his mind, without a struggle, to the mere possibility of such a complication. Sickness and death—well, they are every man's lot, of course; but to him they had been very far-away phantoms, having no sort of bearing on the present, or on anything nearer than a future so remote as to seem almost a myth.

‘Do you mean that?’ he asked with dry lips. ‘Then I—I am liable—to—’

His selfishness was magnificent in its completeness. He had quite forgotten his father and his father's pain; he was entirely absorbed in gazing at the horror from his own coin

of vision. The perspective of things changed suddenly, as soon as this ugly dread came up over the horizon of his own healthy days. Mr. Ladon looked at him without a spark of pity, feeling that he was talking to an utter stranger.

‘It is not more than a possibility,’ he replied mildly, playing with the situation. ‘I do not say that Sir Michael thought it certain. Only it is very probable, and you will never be able to consider yourself quite safe, you know. I am afraid the news distresses you?’

‘But this—this is damnable! . . .’ stammered the other. ‘What have I done to deserve this devilish thing? What have I done?’

‘That is what I wondered on my own account,’ said his father.

Mr. Ladon by now was so far removed from hope or fear that he was able to survey the scene from a detached point of view, and even to find in it the elements of a rather grim humour.

‘Oh, *you* . . .!’ replied his son, signifying that such matters were quite beyond consideration and off the point. ‘Father, you are not joking with me, are you?’ Then a new thought seized him. ‘Enid?’ he gasped. ‘Was this—did she?—tell me—was *this* why——’

‘Yes,’ said Tempest Ladon very slowly, looking up. ‘She knew everything, and now you understand what she did, and why.’

‘Then—Barbara—I don’t know yet—but if she has a son, will he—will he inherit this disease as well?’

The lone wolf found himself able to answer the agonized question quite coldly and impersonally. What did it matter to him, with all the world against him, what might become of St. John and Barbara and the house of Ottemer? They had refused to help him; let them now help themselves! Let them pity themselves, who had declined to pity him!

‘I believe so,’ said Mr. Ladon calmly, “unto the third

and fourth generation," you know, of them that love Him and obey His Commandments. That is how the curse runs in the new Book of the Law. I greatly fear that your son may have to endure what I am now enduring. Perhaps by then, St. John, you will have had a little personal experience of suffering yourself, which may help you, if you are still alive, to pity him as you never pitied me.'

'You speak as if you were glad,' cried St. John, kindled to indignation by the indifference of his father's callous remark. Such selfishness sickened him.

'I am neither glad nor sorry,' answered Mr. Ladon deliberately. 'Where is the use of being either glad or sorry over a possibility which neither one's joy nor one's sorrow can ever retard, or accelerate, or avert by a moment? You have given me an excellent lesson in the economizing of emotion. To feel joy or sorrow at this point would be a great waste of emotion. At present I require all the sorrow I can muster for my own use.'

'You talk like a stone devil,' exclaimed the younger man hotly.

'I think perhaps I am one,' was all the answer that he got.

But St. John was paying no attention. Evidently his father was quite mad. There was only room in St. John's brain now for the consideration of his own case; or, rather, terror on his own account had given place to terror on his son's. His certainty that Barbara would give him a son was characteristic. And now that son was to be born and reared beneath the shadow of a terrible black fate which might sweep down upon him at any moment of his life. The agony which, in his father's case, he had contemplated with a compassionate equanimity, now changed its face for St. John, and became a thing of unspeakable horror when considered as the probable destiny of himself and his son—especially of his son. It seemed to him altogether fiendish

that the new actor should be thus innocently involved in the detestable tragedy of the older ones.

'I must never have a son,' he said at last—'that is what it comes to.' He spoke as if to himself in a whisper of broken terror.

'Possibly,' said the cold stranger across the table; 'your consideration comes a little late in the day. You have been—how many months married? It seems years to me.'

St. John revolted against the unnatural calmness of his father.

'Damn it all!' he cried, 'is it nothing to you that I must live and die childless, and the place go to the Lord knows who?'

Tempest Ladon meditated a moment.

'Curiously enough,' he replied at length, 'you are right. These considerations are nothing at all to me. A year ago they would have been everything. But now they seem quite uninteresting, somehow. I have other things to think of. Matters have fallen into perspective, and the thoughts that used to stand in the foreground have now receded into infinite distance, where they seem very small and insignificant.'

But his son was not listening.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, 'do you suppose I want to hear your crazy notions? Do you realize that I have only two alternatives—either never to have a son, or, if I have, with the risk of seeing him die in agony by inches? Do you understand that I must either be a sort of murderer, or else let Ottemer go to some twentieth cousin or other? Of course, I know how useless it is to appeal to you; you don't seem a friend to anything or anybody.'

'Nobody and nothing is a friend to me,' rejoined his father slowly.

'Never to have a child,' said St. John to himself, 'or else——'

'It strikes me that your despair is premature,' suggested Mr. Ladon amiably. 'There is time yet.'

'You devil!' said his son slowly. 'You know you have hit on the terror of my life. Nothing shall come of it, though, if I can help it—I promise you that. Anyhow, you have spoiled our lives; I suppose you are pleased.'

'My path is strewn with roses, certainly,' answered Mr. Ladon, smiling. 'Perhaps one day you may be as happy in similar circumstances as I am now. It is very probable; but I have so much feeling yet as to hope you may never suffer that.'

St. John felt slightly ashamed of himself.

'You must forgive me,' he said. 'Naturally one is disturbed by this sort of news, and then a man hardly knows what he is saying.'

'Yes; you showed such a perfect understanding of that truth in my own case that I have no hesitation in making the same allowances for you that you so generously made for me.'

'You and I are different. But you can't say I was hard upon you, father. You know how sorry I was for you.'

'I don't wish to seem abrupt or inhospitable,' said his father, 'but I should rather like to get a little sleep. I had no rest last night, and I have had a trying morning. Perhaps you will go and talk to Barbara. She seemed a trifle exhausted when we parted.'

'I hope I have not tired you,' said St. John rather stiffly, not pleased that his overtures had been received thus tepidly. He thought he had done very generously to make them at all.

'By no means. I have been deeply interested in observing your point of view.'

'My God! you seem to be dead already, for all the human feeling you have!' cried St. John, stirred to new revolt.

'Do you remember what the Spanish Ambassador said when Mazarin was carried out on to the terrace, pale and dying behind his paint and powder?'

'No, I don't remember. What does it matter?'

'He made a most ingeniously cruel remark. He said: "This gentleman reminds me very much of the late Cardinal Mazarin." I may well remind you of the late Mr. Ladon of Ottemer.'

'That is just what you don't do,' exclaimed St. John. 'My father was a very different person from you.'

'I can't say. He is dead, and I don't remember him. Good-bye.'

Not trusting himself to continue the ghastly and unnatural dialogue, St. John turned and went out of the room in search of Barbara. Mr. Ladon had meant to go over papers and private documents, but he had not been long alone before his tired head dropped forward on his hands, and he slept the sleep of exhaustion.

Barbara had spent some time recovering from the storm that had so swept her off her feet that morning. She was not a person of riotous vitality, and the prevailing atmosphere of gloom and animosity which pervaded Ottemer was a cruel and crushing trial for her endurance. Week by week her mood grew duller and more leaden in the lack of sunlight. She was therefore the less prepared to endure with a serene front the explosions of rage with which Mr. Ladon's deepening dislike seemed daily to threaten her in growing frequency. She required gaiety to fortify her against difficulties; and life at Ottemer, both within and without, seemed to Barbara of a dead and unrelieved grey-ness. The sun rarely shone for either mental or physical eyes; and, on the occasions of his rare apparitions, he was but a watery and pallid orb. Barbara was a person to whom active happiness or enjoyment was an actual necessity. From an hour's amusement she could store up

strength to resist a certain amount of annoyance. But, without the amusement to stoke up her vitality, the engine ran feebly and more feebly, till at last it ran down altogether. After she had escaped from her father-in-law she took refuge in the garden, and there endeavoured to collect her flagging powers. Fortunately the day was bright, and external influences always greatly swayed her. The encircling hilltops were powdered with an early snowfall, and after the heavy frost of overnight the air sparkled with brilliant vitality, and the sun shone down on Ottemer with unaccustomed energy. As there were no flowers round the house, Barbara found no brown and wilted ruins of vegetation to depress her. Instead, she could wander down to the edge of the water and rejoice in the strange and cheering change that the night had brought about. The lake no longer lay cold as steel and ungenial as a hostile grey eye; now it flickered and danced in the sunlight, flashing blue and gold with hilarity almost unbecoming in so staid and elderly-looking a piece of water. Gradually, in the exhilaration of the morning, the numbness of Barbara's spirits passed away. She laughed and sang a little to herself, and played with the bulrushes round the shore, on whom the night had left a load of dewdrops that transformed them into jewelled sceptres flashing beneath the clear smile of the air. Barbara let go reflections and the memory of annoyances, and, by a blessed gift of her nature, lived entirely, childishly, in the joy of the untroubled moment. When the Lady Lisa delicately emerged from a bush, Barbara even attempted to play with her. With a glare of intense malevolence, the Lady Lisa swore comprehensively and fled, with elevated bushy tail erected and carried in defiance like an oriflamme. She disapproved of ubiquitous kittens, but that did not imply any approval of their destruction by unhallowed means. At least, the servants, who looked upon her with a superstitious veneration, owing as much to her difference

from all other known animals as to their rumours of her fabulous value, had already come to the conclusion that she fully understood the tragedy of overnight, and viewed the part that Barbara had played with stern and immitigable wrath. In any case, whatever explanation may be given, the fact remains that she seemed to regard Mrs. Ladon that morning with even more hostility than usual. For a moment Barbara watched her with irritation, and then relapsed into the dreamy placidity of her mood.

It was thus her husband found her at last, and the sight of her contented him. He, also, wanted to be cheered—wanted some relief from the strenuous gloom through which he had just been dragged. For an hour he put resolutely behind him all recollection of the difficulties in which he was involved. They talked and laughed happily on frivolous, indifferent topics. After a prolonged strain, it is wonderful how much and how completely the human soul can forget for a time. The heavier the load the more definitely can it be laid by for an hour or so; and Hamlet is not the only human being who has found it easy and natural to take a holiday from an overwhelming anxiety by playing whole-heartedly for a while at some innocent and quite irrelevant game. Barbara felt that the first days of their marriage were renewed.

‘Everything looks so beautiful to-day,’ she said. ‘I am so glad you are cheerful and happy to match, St. John.’

‘The place is always beautiful,’ he answered lovingly; ‘but sunlight suits it, I think, even better than shadow.’

‘I wonder which you like best,’ inquired Barbara, ‘me or this ridiculous old place? I believe I am quite jealous of the place.’

He replied convincingly that she came first—a long way first. Then he added:

‘But the place comes a good second, Barbara—yes, it does.’

‘What ever would you do if you had to go away from it?’ said Barbara, one of whose few secrets from her husband was her stagnant horror of Ottemer, and her desire to get away from the country that was all in all to her husband.

‘Don’t talk of it,’ he said. ‘I don’t think I could bear it. Honestly, I don’t think I could live long away from it. The place is me, and I am it. It is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.’

‘Why, I thought I was that,’ she protested.

‘Yes, yes, of course; but so are these hills and moorlands somehow. I cannot explain. All my life seems wrapped up in them. Here I was born, and here I was bred, and here, please God, I shall die and be buried.’

Barbara shuddered a little, and a chill passed across her mood.

‘So you will never, never go away,’ she said—‘never, never, never?’

‘Well, only for a week or a month or so, now and then. I feel almost a stranger everywhere else. This is my home, and yours too, Barbara. Don’t think you will ever escape. Why, I don’t know whether this place belongs to us or we to it. Father and son, father and son, we have belonged to these mountains and this house from generation to generation. There has never been a break.’

He paused for a moment, trying to ignore the possible break that lay ahead, or the possibility of a still more dreadful succession. Barbara broke in with a laugh.

‘What convenient wives you must always have had!’ she cried, with added gaiety to counteract her depression at hearing once more of her husband’s unaccountable enthusiasm for Ottemer—‘such good, obedient women! St. John, what would you do supposing I presented you with eight plain daughters in steady succession, and never a son at all?’

‘For God’s sake,’ he cried with a sudden seriousness

that she mistook for an excellent jocosity, 'don't talk of it, Barbara—don't talk of it!'

'But I want to know,' she persisted, 'what would happen to this beloved place. Where would it go to after us? And would you ever forgive your wretched wife?'

'Go to?' he replied. 'Oh, God knows! I suppose there are some collaterals somewhere far back. We have never had many children. Neither of my aunts, you see, has an heir of any kind now. Oh, Barbara, what a ghastly subject for you to choose, and on this day of all days!'

'How frightfully excited you always get at the very idea of parting with Ottemer!' laughed poor innocent Barbara. 'I wonder what in the world you would say if your father died and left it to someone else?'

'Thank the Lord, he can't do that,' answered her husband solemnly, with heartfelt gratitude. 'It's tied up too tight. By God! I believe I could kill him if I thought he meant to do that, and had the power. Of course, I wouldn't really, but I should feel like doing it almost, that's what I mean.'

'Goodness! how truculent you are! I cannot understand bricks and mortar and a few miles of unprofitable moorland getting such a hold on you as that,' commented Barbara with wistful earnestness.

'Don't talk like that even in joke,' he answered. 'I know you don't mean it, but I hate to hear you say such a thing. You know what the bricks and moorland mean to me. You might as well think of me without my soul as without my home.'

'Did your poor mother love this place?' inquired Barbara, anxious to change the thorny subject that had suddenly scratched the surface gaiety of their mood, and also desirous of discovering whether her predecessor had endured her own sense of exclusion, or had genuinely entered into the savage feeling of possession that inspired the Ladons

whenever they talked of Ottemer. Had that dead woman disliked the place secretly and shamefacedly, as she herself disliked it, or had she truly and honestly come to love it—she, the Italian?

‘I cannot tell you,’ replied her husband; ‘I cannot remember my mother. I was too young when she died. I think sometimes I can just call to mind an extraordinarily beautiful fairy-like little creature, but probably that is only a fancy built up on what they have told me.’

‘And Mr. Ladon was very fond of her?’

‘You have heard the whole story,’ said St. John, not anxious to think of his father. ‘Yes, I have always believed, I don’t quite know why, that he gave her more than she returned. I know he was perfectly happy with her. He has often told me how happy he was. Why, on her deathbed she implored them to burn a certain despatch-box of hers, with all the contents. She wanted to make the people swear to burn them. My father soon found out that the box was full of letters—of course—their letters to each other. And then, when she died, naturally he could not bear to burn them. So he kept them carefully, and every night ever since he has had the box set on a table at the foot of his bed. You see how much he loved her.’

‘That was rather beautiful of him,’ mused Barbara. ‘Their letters to each other; I suppose he must have read them over and over again since then?’

‘He has never looked at one of them. He told me, on the only occasion when I ever spoke about them, that the joy of possessing them was so great that he could never bring himself to touch so much as an envelope; so he kept the box locked. Wasn’t that curious?’

‘And you were the only child,’ said Barbara, returning to her first meditation. ‘How lucky you were a son!’

‘Wasn’t it?’ said her husband rather seriously, she thought. She tried to continue the dialogue, but he seemed moody

and irresponsible, fixed on some other thought. A chill had fallen across their gaiety, and a strange shadow darkened her unaccustomed sunlight. The rest of that day dragged by in diligent attempts on both sides to seem happy and untroubled in mind. Like all such efforts, they failed egregiously in their amiable hypocrisy, and the sedulous cheerfulness of the one only served to make the other more awkward, more uncomfortable, and more transparently mendacious in his effort to appear at ease.

And from that night St. John divorced his life from Barbara's as far as might be. He separated himself from his wife. Neither mockery nor entreaties could prevail upon him to account to her for this sudden chill. For some days she made every effort to arrive at a reason, to remedy his determination. She scolded, coaxed, tempted—all in vain. Not only was his resolve unchangeably firm, but he was also adamant against all her entreaties for an explanation. He would not, and he could not, tell her of the fear that haunted him; and from day to day he watched his wife in dread of finding his precaution useless. She, poor girl, wrestled vainly to have the sentence repealed, or at least explained. But as the days went by, and she found herself more and more inexorably estranged from her husband's side, she gradually gave up the battle, and engaged herself in endless bitter musing as to what his strange unfriendliness might mean. He seemed to care for her as before—even more, perhaps—and yet he had put her away from him. He might be as loving and lover-like in his daily ways and words as she could wish; he was: he evidently took pains to be. But this only intensified her misery, her starvation, her sense of undeserved abandonment. The whole affair was a horrible, unanswerable riddle. Hour by hour she beat her brains hopelessly to find a solution, and at last she decided that she owed her desertion to some malicious intervention of her father-in-law. He must have said something to his

son—told him some cruel lie, some monstrous legend, to separate him from the daughter-in-law whom he hated. That must be it, though St. John utterly refused to reply to any of her questions. What could old Mr. Ladon have said or done? Nothing could be too vile or wicked for his designs. Had he not warned her of his purpose himself? This was what he had meant when he threatened her during that awful scene of hatred. From day to day she nursed her growing fury against the man who had thus struck at her so callously, so dishonourably, in her heart's tenderest place. Let him, then, beware of her. He deserved no mercy, after what he had done; and he should have none, if Heaven were ever to deliver him into Barbara's hands. So her anger grew harder and bitterer from day to day.

CHAPTER XXI

CONSCIOUSLY or unconsciously, accordingly as we possess or lack the sense of humour, we are all prone to believe that our own case must necessarily turn out the one exception to inviolable law. The laws of Nature may be inexorable for the rest of the world, but we can rarely get free from the hope that we ourselves are destined to be the objects of some miraculous visitation. Mr. Ladon knew what he had to expect in the course of his illness. Nevertheless, he viewed the fulfilment of his fate with an incredulous resentment. In other cases the disease might pursue a steady course to death, but in his own surely it was reasonable to expect that many years of practising piety might earn some unheard-of mitigating development? Yet slowly the truth was forced upon him, that the sentence passed against him was to be softened by no commutation of penalties. As if stirred to full vitality by the excitement of his rage with St. John and Barbara, the tumour in his brain embarked thenceforth on a steady and unrelenting campaign against him. Moments of relaxation were few, and grew rapidly fewer as the days passed by; the pain itself, as he had always known it would, and always hoped it would not, grew every day more appalling in its violence, more indefatigable in its onslaughts. He appeared no longer out of his own rooms, where he prolonged his struggle alone. The torments that he suffered rendered all mortal intercourse impossible, as, during their hours of supremacy, the victim became something less than sane or human, as he writhed

helplessly in their grip. Even in the moments of peace he had no power to do more than get rest while he might, and thus store strength to endure the next attack. Therefore St. John and Barbara saw nothing of their father. And, being out of sight, he was also more or less out of mind, seeing that they both had worries enough of their own without considering his. If ever the memory of him occurred to Barbara, it was as the shameless enemy who had inexplicably succeeded in divorcing her from her husband. She had little inclination to think of him at all, and none to think of him with charity or kindness.

But he, meanwhile, was busy thinking of Barbara. He had not abandoned his project of escape; he was but trying to mature force with which to impose his will on hers. His plan was fully made out, with the part that she was to play in its execution, and, as the maddening episodes of agony came and went, his desperate reeling brain fixed itself with a more and more unnatural strength on contemplation of the vengeance that he meant to take. The thought of Barbara's punishment became a monomania, and that miserable monomania became ere long the one direction in which his fevered intelligence preserved even a semblance of sanity or power. As the days went by he fostered his plans, took all the preparatory steps for his departure, knotted or broke all the loose strands of his life. Yet every measure was taken, as it were, mechanically. Though he had power to think, to plan, to execute, yet it seemed as if only a machine were at work, while his real self lay far away, tormented in the grip of monstrous pangs and monstrous thoughts. At last, however, after several days, he found himself at liberty to take the final step. The only doubt that still oppressed him was lest pain might so have debilitated his forces as to leave him too weak successfully to dominate the will of Barbara. He no longer felt himself so vigorous as in that earlier scene of triumph, and occa-

sionally he feared that her opposition might be too strong now for his failing tyranny to conquer. He longed to find some weapon to reinforce his commands; if he could hold over her some threat, some terrible penalty, then he felt certain that he would be able to enforce her obedience. And then, then, away for the great peace of the Everlasting Silence! As he grew near to death, and saw in the strong Angel his best, his only friend, all the arid minutiae of Christian theology began to grow blurred and shadowy before his eyes. He became less and less concerned with death-bed superstitions, with imaginary materialistic details of the Last Day, the Judgment, Hell, and Heaven. The only thing he could now clearly contemplate was release from pain. From the tossing waves of torment he only looked for entrance to a very calm haven; nothing else concerned him, neither the aspect of the haven nor what might happen after his arrival.

Now his sick brain seemed to live in a wild and whirling chaos of noise, flashing flame, incessant convulsion and storm; his eyes were fixed on death as a place of sweet, cool darkness, where he could rest in a healing silence, undisturbed any more by the clamorous, blazing anguish of existence. Yet with this concentrated hope blended his crazed desire to satisfy his rage against Barbara. He would, by the one stroke, attain his own release and her imprisonment in toils of a bitter bondage. For he thought he knew her too well to fear that her nerves could be strong enough to bear the memory of murder. He believed that the consciousness of what she had done would ere long cease to seem just and merciful, and that, sooner or later, she would be crushed beneath the ever-increasing burden of superstitious remorse and guilt. She was of coarse fibre certainly, but not of fibre so coarse as continued happiness would involve. He took a virulent insane delight in considering how her endurance would bend and break beneath the load

he meant to lay upon it as his last parting gift. His scheme appeared to him a happy miracle of ingenuity, a fine point of casuistry which should easily blind God to the suicide essentially involved in thus driving Barbara to murder. She had come between him and his son; she had triumphed, had she, in her wifehood and her supremacy? But he would come between her and her happiness; henceforward after death, far more than in life, he would be as a threatening ghost standing for ever between the murderess and her husband, between the criminal and all her joy in life. She would never be able to escape from the recollection of her crime; it would crush her, break her, damn her utterly. For, surely, she would never have the power of repentance. Remorse—yes, terror in abundance, but effectual repentance must always be beyond the reach of one who has killed in hate. Kill in hate she should; on that he was resolved. He would move her to no pity, for in actions of pity there is pardon; he would force her to execute her task in a paroxysm of carefully exasperated hatred. And thus his double end would be accomplished. He only waited an opportunity to put his plans into force; meanwhile he pondered them with a ferocious persistence so far abandoned to desperation as to be no longer sane or responsible for the horror it contemplated with so morbid a delight.

But of all the preparations that he made for his end the hardest was that which involved the destruction of his dead wife's letters. In the last days of his life the dead woman seemed to live again in that small sealed box of letters. It was murder most terrible to condemn her ghost to the flames. As his brain grew weaker in its devouring fever Elena became more vivid and precious to his memory. How she had loved him! How he had loved her! And what an awful desert of years between then and now! But soon the distance faded and vanished. Once more she seemed to be with him, and all the intervening clouds of

loneliness and pain and bitterness to have rolled away. She came to him among the shadows where he walked; the years had only added to her old-world daintiness, the beauty of her wonderful eyes, the deep music of her quaint utterance. While he thought of her, the ugliness of the present was absorbed into the loveliness of the past. He lived happy moments in the company of his old self and the woman who had loved him. How charming she was—the way she walked, the way she spoke, the perfect love, the unshadowed confidence that she had always had in him! Again he heard her telling him so deliciously all the delicious little secrets of her heart, pouring out everything without reserve. What sort of man had he been, then, to deserve such trust? Then the echo of her voice faded as he tried to measure the distance that separated the young, lovable man of more than twenty-five years ago from the ugly, tormented wreck of destiny in whom hate alone survived. But the task was hopeless in its bitterness, and soon he returned into the blessed company of the dead. Elena, Elena, was it possible that in some strange way, from some strange place, she was watching him, was feeling for him, was helping him to bear the burden of his agony?

So he had duly taught himself to believe, and now her presence became almost a thing corporeal and visible. As she had so loved him, she could not now be far away in the hour of his trial. And yet he must commit the final outrage, must destroy dear letters where her spirit still lived, lest irreverent hands should afterwards turn them over and discover their secrets. The notion that they might fall into Barbara's clutches clinched his determination. Though he should commit murder on Elena's memory, yet he would never leave her helpless in the grip of Barbara's vulgar ribaldry. But it seemed as if, in destroying these, he would be standing once more by

Elena's deathbed. How well he remembered it, those many years ago! How pale and beautiful she had been! how violent in her piteous terror lest he should ever open that casket and read over in cold blood the beautiful secret of her love for him! How she had pleaded with him to destroy the box, not realizing that she asked a sacrifice too heavy for any mortal lover to make. He had promised all she wished, to ease her parting, but how could she ever have thought that any oath could bring a man to destroy the last evidence of love's presence in his life? She might have known him better than ever to think such things. But in the last hours the mind grows clouded. Who can tell what strange pains may have haunted Elena? She might even have dreaded that he would remarry. And then, how terrible to think that her letters might be contemptuously read by some sensible, matronly second wife! No, she had commanded their destruction in a moment of weak panic. She would be glad that he had broken his promise; she would pity his pain, and never grudge him the consolation that the mere sight of that casket had given him, through the less maddened moments of his torment. How well he understood that dear nature of hers! how perfectly he read her wishes and the sweet faithfulness of her heart! In these hours of renewed communion with the dead he found his only release from pain. In his complete and perfect reliance on her love, he even found consolation for all the grief and all the loneliness that he had lately endured. His love for her balanced his hate for Barbara, and his trust in Elena was now the one thing that stood between his soul and the last despair. Yet, before he went out to meet her again in the mysterious land, he must destroy her letters, that her spirit might be set free from all earthly bonds, and the peril of all earthly interference. With a sigh he took the casket.

He turned it about in his hands for awhile, wondering at

the painted angels on its panels. No wonder they were so beautiful and bright: they were guardian angels to that beautiful soul of hers. The Lady Lisa, scenting fresh developments, drew near to assist him in his work of discovery. But he gently put her by, and continued his task unaided. It was no great labour to force the lock. Soon it was done, and the treasure-house of his dead wife's love threw open its doors. For a moment he hesitated, as one on the threshold of a holy place. A little bundle of letters lay before him, neatly tied, and inscribed in her clear, stiff writing. The ink was faded and pale, but he could clearly read the words. For some sweet little reason they were addressed, not in her own Italian, but in French. '*Lettres à mon cœur*,' ran the whimsical title. Very reverently he took the packet up and opened it. Then he saw why she had so earnestly implored him to destroy the box. Those letters had never been sent through any earthly post-office. She must have written them to express the great love that she dared not speak. They were the simple, naked outpourings of her loving, loyal heart. Ordinary words, ordinary life, had not sufficed her to set forth her devotion; her passion of love must needs find vent in beautiful private words that no eye but her own must ever see. Small wonder that her delicate pride had desired their destruction; and yet she need not, had she known, have so grudged her husband the joy of reading all that was in her soul. So now at last the revelation of her perfect love would serve to hearten him on the dark road he was to tread. He opened the first letter, and the ghost of dead Elena seemed to hover close as he broke the seal.

How beautiful it was! how complete, how adorable, in the simplicity of its adoration! French was surely the very language of love, and therefore in French had the Italian strangely chosen to vent her devotion. Why was it addressed to Meleagro, though? What strange fantasy had

prompted her to give her husband so unusual and musical a name? Ah, musical—that was it. Her tender ears had revolted against harsh English syllables, so she had invented for herself another name by which the expression of her love might be made harmonious. Yet—*had* she invented? Surely, many years ago, he had seen someone called Meleagro. He diligently searched his memory. Meleagro, Meleagro? . . . He remembered now: that cousin of hers, that handsome, swarthy boy, whom he had scarcely known. For all these years he had forgotten the existence of Meleagro, and yet he had a strange feeling that he had met him not long since. The notion was preposterous, though. He tried hard to define the image of Meleagro in his mind. Everything that shed light on his dear wife's thoughts, everything that had ever come near her or belonged to her, was sacred and precious to Tempest Ladon. No scrap should escape his search if thought could rescue it. Where had he last seen this Meleagro? Then he started. How absurd he was! He was thinking of his son. It was St. John, swarthy and handsome in his strangely un-English way, whom he was confusing with his vague recollection of Meleagro. How strange that he should have lent his son's features to that far-away Italian! And yet not so strange. Meleagro and Elena were cousins. What more likely, then, than that the family likeness should have repeated itself in Elena's son? And certainly, as his mists cleared away from his memory, he saw that their son was wonderfully like his mother's cousin. What curious tricks heredity plays! And so his wife had coolly taken her cousin's name to worship her husband by. What a quaint, delightful little fancy of hers! Of course, Meleagro was far more of a lover's name than Tempest, so stern and chilly. Why, when she had lain dying, that was still the word by which she had greeted her husband. Little wonder that his own name had repelled poor Elena, and that she had found

herself forced to find another, more in harmony with the beauty of her love, before she could give that love its fullest, deepest expression. Only Elena could have had the dainty poetic notion.

But the letters grew more and more bewildering in their passion. Clearly they were the outpourings of an intense devotion. But Tempest was bitterly ashamed of himself when he discovered that he found them very hard to understand. Thus does time blunt the keen edge of memory. Her allusions had lost their vitality; they conveyed nothing to him. The little events she spoke of might never have occurred, for all that her husband could recollect of them. And why did she talk of separation? She had never been parted from him, and yet here she bewailed their farewells and parting in the most piteous words. Then there came remorse, talk of crime and sin, and of someone who was good and kind and unworthily deceived. What could it all mean? He felt himself incredibly stupid and dense, whereas he was merely suffering the tyranny of a preconceived opinion. What had white-souled Elena to reproach herself with? Why should she, who had never concealed anything from him in her life, now talk of shameful secrets and deceptions and concealments? He began to find the letters almost monstrous in their abandonment of needless imaginary self-reproach. And they got more and more wild as he went on. Now there was mention of his own name, always in terms of pity and admiration. But Meleagro was *he*, so why should he reappear under his own name? He could almost have imagined that poor distracted Elena was writing of two different people. As Meleagro, it seemed, he was adored; as Tempest he was merely pitied—pitied in tones of eager but unregretting repentance. The confusion was terrible. Soon, however, there came mention of a child to be born. That must needs be St. John, and his birth would shed light on these complications. How short their married

life had been ! Only one child, so vigorous all his life, and yet so prematurely born. And then his birth brought swift death to his mother—sucked away her vitality and left her powerless against advancing disease. Rapidly Tempest Ladon's mind reviewed the memories of his son's birth, as he puzzled over Elena's frenzied allusions to her approaching confinement. Wildly she cried that the child would always be Meleagro's, whatever happened. Well, naturally. Her agitation was incomprehensible. Then suddenly his brain stood still, and the spidery writing ran in fire before his eyes. With a crash of thunder came the fearful lightning. 'Mon pauvre mari, qui m'aime tant, il ne faut jamais qu'il le sache—jamais, jamais, jamais.' A great calm fell round Tempest Ladon as the eye of the cyclone. So this was it. He had never understood. So this was the secret that Elena had tried to carry with her to the grave. And it was he, her husband, by Heaven's deadly irony, who had thwarted her wishes in the matter. Tempest Ladon sat very quiet in the hush of his discovery, and the ghost of Elena fled away into the background.

For very many years he had trusted her completely ; for the last few months he had trusted in nothing else. And now so utterly had his last hope broken beneath his hand, that he found the revelation almost amusing. His heart was so stunned, so narcotized, that he had no feeling left. For how long had he built securely on the sure knowledge of the dead woman's love ? All his life, it seemed. And now his whole life was made a lie. She had never loved him. She had never even begun to love him. These letters of hers were not even repentant for the wrong she had done him. She talked of repentance, but it was easy to see that all she meant was pity for her deluded husband, and that, in her own heart, she glorified openly in possession of the child that was to be hers and Meleagro's. This was her confidence ; this was her candour—this the perfect and

childlike trust in which her husband had felt so safe and proud. This was what those wan lips had been murmuring, this was the thought that had lurked in the beautiful wistful eyes, when her husband had found nothing but devotion in her whispers, nothing but pure sorrowful farewell in her gaze. He had regarded her as the very incarnate truth, and all her life she had been lying to him. She had lied to him deliberately, even in the very gates of death. Hitherto, both consciously and unconsciously, he had been sustained and comforted by his certainty of Elena's loving presence at his side. Now suddenly he found that she had never been near him, had been very far away with someone else. He had been comforted only by a lying phantom. Then, in an instant, the lying phantom vanished, and Tempest Ladon was left alone in the black darkness.

He sat like a man stricken blind by lightning. For a moment his world had been an agonized blaze of illumination; then all had passed, leaving him helpless in breathless, immovable night. He knew at last the deep places of despair as he had never known them before, not even in the paroxysms of his pain. For this was a new torment into which he was thrown—an anguish quite as keen as the old, and perfectly capable of co-operating with it to bring him into utter mortification. His son, then, was no son of his. For a long time he sat stunned before the fact. Then gradually he began to consider the bearing that this discovery might have upon his situation. St. John was nothing to do with him, nothing to do with the Ladons, nothing to do with Ottemer. The fact was almost impossible to realize. Yet fact it undoubtedly was, and as Mr. Ladon considered it more and more sanely, he saw that it was fact of the greatest importance.

For suddenly a new idea broke in upon him. St. John had been born and bred at Ottemer. The love of the place was in the very fibre of him. That Mr. Ladon had known

long since, in the days of their friendship. And now what a keen and perfect punishment for dead Elena, that her child should be righteously hounded out of the paradise into which she had so falsely foisted him, and which, thanks to the very circumstances of her crime, he had grown so passionately to love, so completely to identify with his own existence! And Barbara, too—that underbred creature would be thrust back into the gutter whence she had been raised. She would suffer twice—in her own fall, and in the agony of her husband, driven for ever from the one place where his training had fitted him to find perfect happiness. In the cold madness of Mr. Ladon's utter disillusionment he felt no momentary pang of pity. He had sinned somehow; Heaven could witness that he had been very heavily punished. And those others, who had sinned so far more grievously than he—was it not just and right that they should be punished also? Their sufferings could never be as great as his, yet it was certainly lawful that they should suffer. And as Heaven had made him the engine of their punishment, who was he to thwart the decrees of Heaven, or to spare the criminals whose executioner he was meant to be?

He felt a sombre glory in the notion that, after all these years, God had chosen him as the instrument of His wrath against Elena's heartless and unrepented crime. Then his own sufferings came surging back to mind—their utter injustice, their cruel ferocity, this undeserved aggravation of his torment. His sick brain seethed confusedly with many dark and conflicting thoughts. And one emerged triumphant. He had ardently desired a weapon that should compel the obedience of Barbara; and now, by the mercy of Heaven, here was that weapon sharpened and ready to hand. Barbara, he knew, loved her husband. This had long been one of Mr. Ladon's bitterest counts against her. Now it became more bitter than ever. What right had she

to love an impostor? And through her love she should be both ruled and punished. After so much of wedded intimacy Barbara must know how dearly, how deeply, her husband adored the place of his birth. What would she say when she heard that he had no more right there than a tramp, that her enemy held the secret and meant to use it against him—meant to drive him out of the place, out of the country, to make him the beggar in fact that he was already in justice? Surely Barbara would be agonized, terrified, furious. Surely she would try any means to avert the danger from her husband. And if she fully realized, as she should, that the whole future lay in Mr. Ladon's hand, and that he was resolved to show no pity, then certainly she would not hesitate to use the only means at her command to stop the dreadful development of events. All should be made ready for her, the weapon laid close at her hand. And then, suitably threatened, completely possessed with her terror, she would find it easy to destroy her enemy before he spoke. She should kill him thus, in rage, in deadly fear; and thus he would obtain his blameless rest, and she her everlasting damnation. And it should be all in vain, too, for he would leave the letters as a witness against St. John's claim to Ottemer, and they would effectually prevent him from ever entering into possession. The whole scheme was perfect. Only needed to store up strength. Elena should soon be amply punished for her devastating treachery.

Mr. Ladon, utterly exhausted by his pain, collapsed and slept. The Lady Lisa jumped upon his knee and settled into a doze.

CHAPTER XXII

'I HAVE been a failure—a failure all through,' said Barbara pensively.

Her husband looked at her with eyes of disagreement.

'A failure—you?'

He laughed, and his laughter expressed more than a torrent of protestations.

She looked up at him longingly. She was seated in a low chair by the fireside, with one foot extended to the warmth. She seemed frail and languid that night, and her head overburdened with its weight of wonderful hair.

'You say that,' she answered slowly; 'you seem to mean it. And yet—have you been satisfied with me? And, if you have—been, what is wrong with me now?'

His face was set in hard and painful decision.

'Trust me,' he said. 'Barbara, can you trust me?'

She shook her head.

'I ought to,' she replied; 'I know I ought to. But love is the hardest thing in the world for a woman to take on trust. Oh, St. John, do tell me what has happened! I cannot understand. You seem to care for me still, and yet I cannot always believe that you do.'

'Yes, you can,' he said persuasively, smiling down into the amazing blue of her eyes.

After a pause she smiled also.

'I suppose I can,' she answered softly at last. 'Somehow, whatever you do or leave undone, I can never quite believe that you have left off caring for me, St. John. It's very

strange. Reason ought to tell me quite clearly that you have; and yet faith always says no, and I am not nearly so unhappy as I sometimes make myself think I ought to be.'

'Poor Barbara! Is life so difficult for you, then? But remember, there is so much wrong now, which time must set right before long.'

'That is why I say I am such a failure. I have never been able to make the situation possible. I thought I could make him love me, St. John. But all along I have failed. He has only hated me worse every day.'

'Oh, he is crazy, Barbara! You know that now as well as I do. Illness seems to have had the most horrible effect on him; it has almost driven him mad. I should have thought he would have had more—well, more strength of character. However, he must be released from his sufferings before long, thank God! We cannot wish them to go on much longer. And then you and I will be alone together again.'

'It was not kind of you,' she continued slowly, 'to tell me the other day that he had nothing the matter with him. I believed you, and it made me seem terribly unkind to him. I am afraid I must have seemed very hateful and cruel. I would give anything in the world to explain things to him, but he won't listen now to a word I say. It made him hate me more than he had ever done before.'

St. John moved impatiently.

'Oh, do let us forget him!' he answered. 'I tell you he is not responsible for anything he says or does. He had no right, in the first place, to come tormenting you with his ailments. I know I gave you a false impression, but it was only because I wanted to spare you worry and distress. He told you about his illness and so forth, just simply to worry and distress you. Oh, I had that from his own lips! And do you suppose I was going to see my wife made

miserable? Not if I could help it, whether he was my father or no.'

Barbara smiled again.

'I can't help being pleased with you,' she answered, 'whatever you say or do. You made me cruel to him, but I know you did it for kindness to me. That gives me such a delicious warm feeling of support and comfort—to think you do not mind taking any burden on yourself; so that I may be free and happy. You are so brave. . . . I wonder if I should ever have the courage to bear such a great load for you? I ought to, so as to make the bargain more equal. I hope some day I may have a chance of showing how much I can bear for you, St. John.'

'I pray to God you may not,' he answered hastily.

'That is so unfair. Why should you have all the privileges? I claim my share. If you love me, St. John, you must let me do things for you. That is what love means.'

He laughed, to cover his awkwardness.

'Well, she *shall* be a heroine if she likes. I will deny her nothing. What particular form of heroism should you prefer?'

'Don't laugh at me. I am serious. You have borne so much for me, to save me, all these dreadful months since our marriage.'

He interrupted hastily: 'If I had borne all I meant to bear, they would not have been dreadful.'

'Ah! but you have saved me so much. You could not have saved me everything. And I was so stupid. Everything I said and did offended him. It was far more my fault than his; it was never your fault at all. Oh, St. John, I do not know how I could have lived without you! Should I have the nerve to do as much for you, I wonder? In some things I am silly and superstitious and weak. I wonder if I could bear a great load of responsibility for you

to save you from the weight of it? I wonder if I should have the courage to lie to you for your own sake, as you lied to me for mine? There; don't tell me now that lies are impossible in love. Sometimes the greatest love in the world can only be shown by lying to its object.'

'Then I will be contented with the second-best love,' he answered.

But she took no notice of his affected flippancy.

'One never knows beforehand,' she said, 'whether one would rise to an emergency or sink beneath it. Your father——'

'Oh, don't talk of him! He is no father of ours.'

'Your father thinks everything bad of me. He is certain I should collapse and go under, if any real responsibility were laid upon me. He believes I am utterly shallow and untrustworthy. Perhaps I am; I don't know. And yet, if it were a question of saving you trouble, St. John, don't you think that I might triumph over my nature? Don't you think the trial might bring out unsuspected reserves of strength in me? One hates to think one's self such a useless coward.'

St. John took her hand tenderly.

'I only want you to be happy,' he answered. 'That is the burden of duty that is laid upon you.'

'But I can't be happy unless I am helping you. What is the good of saying, "I love you, I love you!" and never doing anything to prove it? I don't even say it as often as I should like to. I am afraid of being a nuisance. See what a coward I am!'

'One does not say such things,' he replied; 'but if one really cares for someone, they know it. There is no need of words. Real love does not go on chattering and protesting. Don't you believe I love you, Barbara? And yet, Heaven knows, I only say so about once a month.'

'Yes, it is all right for you. But for me—somehow it

seems such a waste of time to talk about the crops, or the weather, or the soup, when I might be trying to explain how much I really do care for you, St. John. As it is, I can only show what I feel by ordering you the soup. I want to do something more for you. Think of what you have done for me. I spend my time imagining you in all sorts of difficulties and danger, and thinking of the fine, splendid things I would do to get you out of them. But real life is so humdrum. . . . And then—there comes the horrid doubt whether, after all, I should have the strength to do things for you. Oh, I wish I knew whether I should rise to the occasion or be a miserable failure!

‘You need not fret yourself, Barbara. Of course, the need will never come, but I would trust you more than anyone in the world. Even if you were the feeblest coward ever born, Love would give you power to do what was necessary. People who love need never doubt their own strength. For their love acts through them, and gives them all the inspiration and endurance they need, however poor and invertebrate their own characters may be. And you don’t imagine you are poor and invertebrate, Barbara?’

‘What a glorious, comfortable doctrine, as the Prayer-Book would say! Do you really believe that, St. John? Oh, I do hope it is true! No; I suppose I am not quite so ineffectual and silly as some women, whatever your father may think. So if you are right, and even fools are reinforced by love when the need comes, perhaps, after all, I should be able to rise to an emergency for your sake. What a wonderful gift of comfort you have, St. John! I was feeling quite anæmic and depressed when you came in, and now I am as brave as a lioness, thanks to you.’

And at that moment the butler entered, and informed Barbara that Mr. Ladon would be glad to see her in his room. As he left the room, having given his message, husband and wife looked questioningly at each other.

'What can he want?' said St. John at last. 'He has not seen either of us for days. Don't go, Barbara. I am afraid he is up to no good.'

'Not go?' she replied, rising from her chair. 'Why, whatever he wants, here is an opportunity for putting my wonderful courage to the proof. Besides—who knows?—he may really want something that I can do for him. He has had time to get over his rage with me. I am not afraid of him any more. Anyhow, I must go, to show him I'm not.'

'He is no better now than a wild beast,' answered St. John. 'I don't like trusting you with him. Barbara, be careful, dear.'

She looked at him, splendid and defiant. Even the folds of her train seemed to flow out behind her with an air of unconquerable victory. The light of self-confidence was in her brilliant eyes.

'Don't be afraid,' she answered; 'I do not think, however he may storm at me, that he can do me any harm . . . not *now*, St. John.'

He gazed at her, thrilled by her beauty, but deaf to her meaning.

'Why, what new protection have you got?' he asked.

She laughed at him.

'Responsibilities, responsibilities,' she replied—'a dutiful wife's proper responsibilities. I didn't know, and now I know, and there is all the difference. "*Car la ru' d'Anjou donn' dans la ru' d'Poitou,*"' she shrilled gaily, then laughed again.

'Barbara,' he said slowly, 'I suppose I understand you, do I?'

She saw comprehension in his eyes, and nodded.

'I expect so,' she replied. 'It doesn't need a Solomon, does it? How long is it since we were talking of just this? And *then* I had no idea—no more than you.'

She stood still, gazing at him, and wondering at the

complicated emotions that strove for mastery in his glance. Unmixed triumph should have been there; and yet something not far removed from terror wrestled with triumph. Surely her news called for no exaggerated fears? Then at last all doubt cleared from his expression, and left only a wild and desperate joy. What he had dreaded, what he had hoped to escape, what he had taken precautions to prevent, was now on its way. Well, the worst had happened—or the best. There was no use any longer in trembling and cowering before possibilities. The future must be accepted with as good a grace as might be. . . . As its coming could no longer be decently averted, the only thing that remained was to hope for the best. After all, the child might well escape the grandfather's taint; there was at least an even chance, rather more than an even chance, that it might. Anyhow, there was no further use in terrors and hesitations. They must make the most of their joy, and keep a very good hope that no harm would come of it. And this news of Barbara's, rendering all restrictions useless, swept away the artificial barrier that St. John had raised between husband and wife. He took her in his arms.

'You have conquered,' he said in a broken voice—'you have conquered, Barbara. There is nothing between us now, there shall never be anything between us again. I swear it.'

She wondered at his excitement.

'Don't keep me now,' she said; 'I must go. St. John, you are glad of my news?'

'Glad? Glad?' He laughed in her face. 'Long live the future, and the incarnation of the future! Pray that our son may always be well and happy, Barbara. Pray, Barbara, for our son may need it; and yet, again, he may not. Of course he won't need it. What a fool I was to be frightened away from my wife by the spite of a madman! I might

have known he was inventing a danger to spoil my life—our life. And he nearly succeeded, Barbara—he nearly succeeded. But now we will forget everything he said; we will never remember a word of it.'

'I don't understand,' said Barbara.

'And you shall never understand. There will never be any reason why you should understand. Let us believe that everything is always for the best. God always deals justly. Everything will be for the best.'

Through the long dimly-lit corridors Barbara made her way towards what she knew would be a critical trial of her endurance. Before her husband she had worn a brave front, but in her own heart she knew that she was utterly afraid of the nameless hostility which she was going to meet. Mr. Ladon had threatened her darkly with dark things; her fear was formless, but she felt that ere long it would take shape. The house seemed to lie in an attentive stillness as she mounted the stair. No sound of life came to her ears. She felt that all the lurking shadows were holding their breath in expectancy of strange, terrible things. The halls and passages, too, were mysterious in their inadequate illumination. The house was far too large to be well lit by lamps; at night, disturbed, but not dispelled, by the ineffectual illumination, the watchful shadows grouped themselves into knots of darkness in the remoter corners of wall or roof. Round the lamps were clear spaces, but beyond their feeble spheres of influence the crowded presences huddled thick and undismayed. And, in the anxious silence, the sense of invisible company was heavy on Barbara as she trailed her way towards her destination. The marble Emperors and Empresses seemed to live again with contemptuous hostility as she passed them one by one; in the faint light their pallid lips appeared to flicker into malignant smiles, and from the walls the ghosts of long-dead Ladons peered evilly down out of heavy gilded frames upon

their latest representative. At last she attained her goal, knocked, and entered.

If the shadows had been a watchful mob in hall and passages outside, here they had gathered in a dense multitude round Mr. Ladon. He had not attempted to scatter them, but sat waiting for his daughter in a small islet of light amid an ocean of crowded darkness. He was laid in a long low chair facing the door by which she was to enter. On a little table at his right hand stood his one candle, a bottle or so, glasses, and the box with the painted angels on its panels. His eyes were fixed without movement on the door, and showed no sign of change nor relief as she entered. She found them fixed immovably upon her, and from the dim cavernous depths of gloom their hard glitter was the one thing that sparkled and lived. She stood for a moment fixed by his gaze; then, with a movement of self-encouraging defiance, she gently entered and closed the door behind her. By her own act she felt herself suddenly cut off from help and human companionship, abandoned to the mercy of the darkness and of the merciless thing that was the centre of the darkness.

For an eternal pause she stood before him, and he said no word. His glance roamed indifferently over her from head to foot, delighting in her beauty, thus handed over utterly to his tyranny. Then at last he spoke. His voice was very dim and pale with fatigue.

'You have come,' he said. 'I thought I should see you some day again.'

'Can I do anything for you?' asked Barbara, with less fear than she felt. 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

'Yes,' he answered slowly, 'there is . . . and you shall do it.'

Suddenly she felt her terror rush upon her in the silence and culminate. She could not answer him. Lying there before her, he looked like a thing paralyzed, half dead.

The flickering firelight was the only thing in the room that moved. Then, from his inanimate figure something detached itself without a sound, and slid away noiselessly into the shadows. It was the cat, disturbed by the approach of her enemy. Barbara saw that Mr. Ladon smiled.

‘How she loves you!’ he murmured. ‘She has a good memory, that little beast. She does not easily forgive. She has taken that quality from me.’

Barbara resented his speech. By resentment alone could she reinforce her courage.

‘You have not sent for me, surely, to talk about those odious cats?’ she asked with intentional brutality. Even an explosion would be better than this menacing tranquillity.

‘You love me as well as you love the cats,’ suggested Mr. Ladon softly.

‘Can you wonder?’ she answered quickly. Then she repented having found self-possession in rudeness. ‘Please tell me what there is I can do for you,’ she inquired. ‘I should be so glad if I can do anything to help you.’

‘Very well, my dear,’ came the reply, without hesitation, ‘You shall give me my medicine. There it is on the table. Pour it out for me, please.’

His helplessness seemed strange to her. She advanced to the table and took up glass and bottle.

‘How much?’ she asked.

‘The proper dose is a teaspoonful,’ he answered. ‘Give me a tablespoonful.’

‘Will that be good for you?’

‘Very good for me indeed. It will do me all the good you can possibly desire.’ Then he remembered that what she was to do she must be made to do, not in pity, but in anger. ‘You know you want to kill me,’ he continued, softly as ever. ‘You know you are a murderess at heart already.’

‘What do you mean?’ she cried breathlessly.

'Only that now is your chance to kill me, here and now. Quickly; don't dawdle.'

'Are you mad?'

'Absolutely. Murderers are damned, you know. I don't want to meet you again in heaven, my daughter, and be pestered with your hateful presence through all eternity. So I am going to insure that I shall go in one direction and you in the other.' He took much for granted.

Barbara gazed at him desperately. He was clearly mad. Motionless he lay, never raising his voice. The stillness, the calm were dreadful. It was dreadful to hear him saying such things so tranquilly, so softly. Barbara shuddered.

'This was your plan,' she said at last, breathlessly. 'This was what you meant me to do. And you think I shall do it? You think you can force me to do it? You want to destroy my peace in this world and the next. You think you will succeed?'

'You perfectly express my intentions,' he returned. 'Yes, I do think I shall succeed. Think what a comfort it will be to you to have me out of the way. You have taken away my son; you know you want to have him all to yourself. You know you are panting to be mistress of this house, and you are just the woman to do murder for so many thousands a year, if the opportunity is made quite smooth and easy for you. See how well I know you! And then—well, you will have your way with my son and my house; but—perhaps you will be a little uncomfortable, even in this world. You will see ghosts possibly, and hear voices saying ugly things in the darkness. You will not like that. You are silly and superstitious, aren't you? Well, that is what will happen. You have not got the strength of mind to bear the memory of a crime. So you will be tormented during the rest of your life on earth, and then, afterwards, you will burn for ever.'

His words dropped slowly out like drops of molten lead,

searing her consciousness. Her dry lips fell apart, but no words came. The devilish wickedness of his proposal appalled her. An overwhelming anger filled her as she contemplated the enormity of his hatred, his eternal and insatiable hunger for revenge. It was inhuman, sickening, fearful. Her nauseated revolt against his design forced her into a rigid and unnatural calm, as she answered him in a level tone whose faint involuntary tremor alone betrayed the great rage that lay beneath.

‘Are you wise to have told me this?’ said Barbara deliberately. ‘Do you suppose now I shall ever do as you ask me? You have hardly gone the wisest way to work.’

‘Oh yes,’ he answered, smiling, ‘you will do as I wish. I will tell——’

‘Please, no,’ she interrupted him; ‘it is quite useless to try and persuade me, after what you have said. I should be mad to listen to you—as mad as you are.’

Her voice now was perfectly cold and determined. He saw that he had successfully fixed her in an irreconcilable mood. Then he could proceed to the second step in her damnation. He spoke swiftly and with entreaty.

‘Oh, Barbara!’ he said, ‘surely you might pity me. You know I am half mad with misery and wretchedness. I am all alone. You have driven my last friend away from me. I have no one to turn to, no hope, no comfort anywhere. I don’t know what I am saying. I am desperate. If ever I have done you any harm, if ever I have meant you any harm, oh, Barbara, you are a woman and a Christian, you will forgive me—you will forgive me. You have everything; I have nothing. Can you grudge me the last gift I beg of you? Barbara, give me death—give me death to heal my sufferings. You cannot think what my sufferings are. I am in hell, Barbara—in hell; and you alone have the power now to give me peace and rest and heaven. Will you refuse me all this—this little last service—only because

you hate me, only because I was angry with you, and you cannot forget that I disputed with you, for an hour, your sole possession of the son who had been mine for so many years—ever since he was born?’

He was completely successful in his object. Barbara was hardly listening to him, and the few words that she heard only confirmed her in the mood that his previous speech had engendered. She was still absorbed in contemplation of his deep plot against her salvation here and hereafter. Every moment a fresh revelation of its horror seemed to break upon her, and, as she vaguely heard him pleading, she was even glad that he had become her beggar, because thus the chance was given her of spurning his entreaties, and, in some small measure, of thus punishing him for the wickedness he had planned against her. As she realized what he was saying, her mouth set firmly in a straight and ugly line. Her eyes smiled triumphantly.

‘Oh, Barbara, surely even you will pity me,’ he concluded.

‘I?’ she answered coldly, unalterably. ‘Can you expect it?’

‘You will leave me to die alone in agony,’ he pleaded, ‘when it is in your power to save me?’

‘I will leave you to die,’ she answered. ‘Who am I to play at being God Almighty? Wait till He gives you death. What have you done for me that you expect me to take your risks, to overshadow all the rest of my life? You have given me nothing but hatred from the first hour of my coming into this hateful house of yours till now. Why, however much I might pity you, this is a fearful thing you are asking me to do—a thing one could only dare for a person whom one loved more than anything in all the world. And you, do you suppose I love you? Do you suppose I can help hating you? You have poisoned every day and every hour of my life. You have given me all the unhappiness you could. You have taken away my husband

from me even, with your horrible lies. And now, after all you have done, after telling me what you hoped I should suffer, you have the face to ask this enormous service of me! . . . Oh, die when you like, where you like, how you like; it is no concern of mine. But don't think that I will lift another finger to help you, don't think I will do anything any more to ease your pain or to shorten it. There is my pity; make the best of it. It is what you deserve—it is better far than you deserve. Oh, you and this house of yours,' she continued, wringing her hands, as the exaltation of her revolt grew upon her—'this house of yours where the sun never shines! You have made the world a prison for me, you and this house of yours—this horrible house of shadows. You are one of them yourself, the blackest, the darkest, the most dreadful shadow of them all. You have eclipsed all the daylight there ever was in my life; your hateful presence has been a nightmare to me. And you ask me to pity you, you seem to think I shall pity you. Why, there is nothing in the world I would do for you—nothing! nothing! nothing!'

The dying man was happy and satisfied. Into just this rage of godless, heartless anger he had calculated that his words would be able to drive her. Whatever she did for him now would certainly not be done in any atoning spirit of love and mercy. He smiled upon her as she stood above him, white-lipped with passion, fiery-eyed with the intensity of her rebellion.

'A house of shadows,' he repeated; 'you have found a good expression. This life is a house of shadows. And you will not help me towards the blessed sunshine?'

'I will never help you anywhere,' cried frenzied Barbara, almost ugly in the fixity of her wrathful resolve.

'You are pitiless?' he inquired.

'You have made me pitiless,' was her reply.

He saw that now he might advance to the next step in

his battle. He called all the remainder of his strength to help him.

'I thought you would be,' said Mr. Ladon calmly, leaving Barbara gasping before his change of manner. 'Then, as you do not help me for my own sake, perhaps you will do so for your husband's.'

'What do you mean?' she cried.

'You love your husband? Then you know what it is that your husband loves as well almost as his wife? Answer me.'

The leaden insistence of his tone compelled her to reply.

'His home,' said Barbara grudgingly—'I suppose you mean his home.'

'Let us call it this horrible house of shadows,' rejoined her enemy. 'As a matter of fact, this is not St. John's home. This house belongs to the Ladons.'

'And my husband . . . ? What?' gasped Barbara, dimly perceiving that the riddle must have a dreadful answer.

'Your husband . . . yes, he is *that*,' replied Mr. Ladon slowly.

'And your son?' said Barbara, rallying.

'Let me put you right,' said the other, with heart-breaking calm. 'My late wife appears to have been a lady of light character. My——'

She interrupted in a quick, croaking whisper :

'Your late wife? Are you mad? Are you still mad?'

'Pray let me finish,' he interposed in a voice whose dry tranquillity added horror to the tranquil words he so bitterly chose. 'My late wife bore me a son, it is true; that son, however, was not mine, but somebody else's. Consequently you and your husband have no more right in Ottemer than any other strangers; consequently it becomes my duty to turn you both out of doors, and to insure the succession of the next legitimate heir. Do you quite understand? The

moment I have died my natural death, you and your husband will turn out of doors, and do as best you can. Ottemer will belong by then to someone else—to someone whose mother happened to be an honest woman.'

His sneer at the dead stung Barbara out of her paralysis.

'You are lying!' she cried harshly; 'you know you are lying. You have invented this story to injure us. Oh, you are horrible! Not even your dead wife is sacred to you. You will sacrifice her name to your hatred for us.'

He went on, unruffled.

'I anticipated your incredulity,' he said. 'Fortunately, the documents are here, arranged in order and perfectly unquestionable.'

He put out a stiff, claw-like hand and touched the painted casket. Barbara stiffened with foreboding. She was beginning to understand what this might mean to St. John and herself. She was unable to speak.

'These papers,' continued Mr. Ladon, 'will convince anyone. For your complete satisfaction I'll add that they are genuine, and that I have only recently discovered their existence myself. Now it becomes my duty to turn you both out of house and home. I shall probably be dead in about two months or so. Then you will have two weeks or so in which to pack your effects and make your future plans before the arrival of the next heir.'

'You will take Ottemer away from my husband,' stammered Barbara, hardly hearing, hardly grasping the pitiless malevolence of the purpose with which she found herself so suddenly confronted.

'I beg your pardon; Ottemer does not belong to him, and never can.'

'But—but he loves the place. The place is everything in the world to him!'

'Most unfortunate. For he will certainly have to live without it.'

'He cannot. Oh, Mr. Ladon, he never will!'

'The moment the breath is out of my miserable body, you and your husband will have to —— turn out of doors.' His voice became a snarl.

'You were fond of him once.'

'No reason why I should commit a crime for his sake. Besides, the love I wasted on him under a misapprehension, he did not care to keep. He handed it on to you.'

'Oh, I cannot believe what you say! You cannot be so horrible as you seem.'

'The sooner you resign yourself to facts, dear Mrs.—Blank, the sooner will you be calm.—Yes, out you'll go,—unless——'

'I beg and beseech you——' Oh, listen to me, listen——'

'I begged and beseeched a little while ago,' was his quick, suggestive rejoinder. 'What was the answer you gave me?'

'Ah-h!' In her staring eyes the horror that he meant was foreshadowed.

'Will you repeat that answer now—now that you stand to gain so much by my death?'

'You are trying to buy my soul,' said Barbara slowly, as she understood the direction of the dialogue.

'I am offering a good price for it, anyhow—your husband's happiness and fifteen thousand a year. Will you accept that price? What you would not do for charity I am sure you will do for money.'

His taunt had its calculated effect. Barbara flushed and rebelled.

'I won't, then!' she answered hotly. 'You must do as you will. My husband would not wish me to pay such a price. Oh no, he wouldn't.'

'Are you so sure of that?' asked Mr. Ladon slowly.

'Oh, yes, yes, yes!' cried Barbara. 'Of course I am sure—I am perfectly sure.'

She wished she were so certain as she pretended to be.

But she dared not wonder to what mad lengths his mad love for Ottemer might carry her husband.

'You quite realize,' continued Mr. Ladon, 'that if a little accident occurred to-night, you would have shown that mercy to a human being which you would not grudge a dying dog.'

'Do you expect me to think of that *now* or to care for that?'

'No, I don't. But listen. If a little accident happened to-night other things might happen, you see, as well. You would be left in sole possession of my secret. You could do what you liked with it. If you liked to run the risk of weak nerves and ghosts and remorse, you might even save your husband and continue him in possession of Ottemer.'

'Don't tempt me so. . . . Oh, leave off tempting me so! I will not listen—no, I will not!' cried Barbara in despair, pressing her hands against her ears. But the words reverberated in her brain.

'You would be rid of me whom you hate, you would have saved your husband, you would have got sole possession of everything for yourself,' murmured Mr. Ladon persuasively in his soft whisper.

She heard him, and his words boomed like thunder.

'No, no, no!' she screamed, to drown his voice. 'Let me go—let me go!'

He saw his moment ready. Her endurance had reached its greatest pitch, while his was as yet untouched. Now a turn of the screw, and her will would be at his mercy. Every element had been eliminated from her consciousness except terror. She would never be able to plead the saving grace of pity for her imminent action. He decided to give one finishing touch before proceeding to the solemn end.

'You could always tell yourself that you had done it for your husband's sake,' he softly suggested.

Once more his arrow hit the mark.

'Yes,' she answered slowly—'yes.' Then she revolted

in a last spasm of rebellion. 'Oh, you are tempting me horribly!' she cried—'horribly, horribly! I will not hear you—no, I will not hear you! You need never think I shall hear you—never, never! It is no use. You cannot tempt me to do this—never, never, never!'

But his eyes were fixed immovably on hers, and beneath the weight of his glance her desperate utterance quailed suddenly, dropped in tone, and at last tailed off into silence. Her strength was exhausted, her resisting power at an end. For a leaden pause he held her in the grip of his merciless gaze. She fidgeted, smiled foolishly, and at last stood still and attentive, crushed into submission.

'Barbara,' said Mr. Ladon quietly, 'you have not given me my medicine yet.'

'No,' she answered vaguely—'no. Where is it?' She had it in her hand.

'Pour it out,' continued the suggestion.

She looked at the bottle with surprise, then took out the stopper and began to pour.

'How much did you say?' asked Barbara dully, trying to assert her existence and regain her lost position in the dialogue. His violent will was on her like a load of iron.

'Drop by drop, carefully,' said the other. 'It is poison, you know.'

'I am afraid of it,' said Barbara in colourless tones. Once more she was utterly in his power. All her resistance had been artfully battled down before the real attack was made upon it. Drop by drop she poured the liquid. 'You want a teaspoonful?'

'You are to give me a tablespoonful,' was his answer, as he saw that she had ceased to tilt the bottle. 'Pour,' he whispered. She hesitated. 'Pour, I say,' repeated the insistent voice. The drops began once more to roll into the glass. 'Go on, go on,' he said, as soon as she showed signs of faltering. His syllables fell like lead upon

her vitality, crushing her into a blind and automatic obedience.

'You are making me pour out too much,' protested Barbara at last. But her words were dull and apathetic.

'Yes,' was all his answer, as he pierced her with hungry eyes—'yes.'

'Take it,' said Barbara; 'take it if you want it.'

'Am I to take it?' he asked. 'Are you sure I am to take it?'

She knew now what he meant, knew what she was doing. But she refused to consider. She was so utterly, so hideously tired that she would hardly have moved to escape her own death. It was so much easier to stay quiet, to accept the inevitable, to follow the line of least resistance and do whatever might be required. Though she was still conscious of her actions, she was too completely paralyzed in will to trouble about their result. Mr. Ladon saw his long schemes crowned with success at last. She knew what she was doing, yet was so far under his influence that she could not avoid doing it. She was going to kill him of her own will, and would never be able to plead that she had acted under compulsion. The crime should be her own to the last detail. The filled glass stood now on the table by his hand.

'Am I to take it?' he repeated, gazing at Barbara.

'There is your medicine,' was her only reply. In that moment she aided and abetted his design. Many thoughts swam vaguely through her mind—St. John's happiness, the old man's pain, his hate, his misery, her own despair. They were none of them definite in detail, but all distinct in outline. Her mind was filled with many arguments, with the possibilities of many good and bad results. But she no longer cared to discriminate or weigh them. 'There is your medicine,' she said, and pushed the glass a little nearer.

His eyes gleamed ; but even this was not quite enough.

‘Give me the glass yourself,’ he said. ‘Give it me,’ he insisted, as she seemed to pause.

That hesitation was the last proof of her complicity. She so far realized her action that she hesitated before committing it. But it was only for an instant. Then she raised the glass and put it into his stiffening grip with a smile.

‘There you are,’ said Barbara.

The triviality of her remark made his satisfaction perfect. She had submitted to her sin.

‘To your soul’s good health!’ he jeered, lifting the glass awkwardly to his lips.

She made one convulsive movement as she saw him do so.

‘Stop!’ she cried.

Then her arm dropped, and she abandoned herself without regret to the inevitable. Now that it had come, the relaxation was almost pleasure. It had been so terrible in its long advent that its actual presence brought relief. She gave a long sigh. Mr. Ladon had drained the glass. Then he turned upon her, and they smiled into each other’s faces. The crime was accomplished, and Mr. Ladon had achieved his heart’s desire in the very manner that had long made it twice desirable. He rose from his chair.

‘Nunc dimittis!’ he said, with a laugh of irony. ‘Good-night. Sleep well.’

He turned from her, and went reeling out of the door towards his bedroom. A swift shadow ran before him into the greater darkness.

Barbara realized after a while that he had gone away to die. She would never see her enemy alive again. And as soon as the crushing stress of his presence was removed her spirit began to revive, her will to reassert itself. Like

many people of small enduring power, she was compensated by nature with a fine recuperative force. She sat down in the chair that he had left, and set herself to contemplate what she had done. In her mood there was no longer apathy or hysteria. The storm had passed, leaving her thought in a state of strange and tranquil clarity. She knew herself a murderess—a murderess in act as well as in purpose. She made no effort to explain or palliate the fact. She had almost meant to kill; she had known well what she was about, and she had killed—but not for kindness. Now, could she bear the burden of her own acts or no?

Suddenly then, as she pondered, a flash of revelation lightened her darkness, and raised the crushed head of her spirit again. Here was the opportunity for which she had craved. Here was a service done, more or less, for her husband—a service, at all events, which relieved him from much difficulty and distress. Here also was a service which it was necessary that she should keep for ever secret from him. And in a moment Barbara understood the reason of her courage. She had risen to the responsibility. More and more certain did she grow of the fact, as the minutes throbbed slowly by. Yes, she had saved St. John. Incidentally she had given peace to the tormented, and relief to herself; but in her thought the service done to her husband came uppermost. In what she had done there was nowhere any harm at all. Nobody in cool sense could blame her. And her child could have no heritage of disease.

‘I am winning all along the line,’ thought Barbara, as she perceived how easily she could make her victory perfect and unquestionable. ‘I don’t believe there is another heir, and even if there were, St. John is my husband, and my duty is always to my husband.’

Without another moment of hesitation she collected Elena Ladon’s miserable letters from their box, ruffled

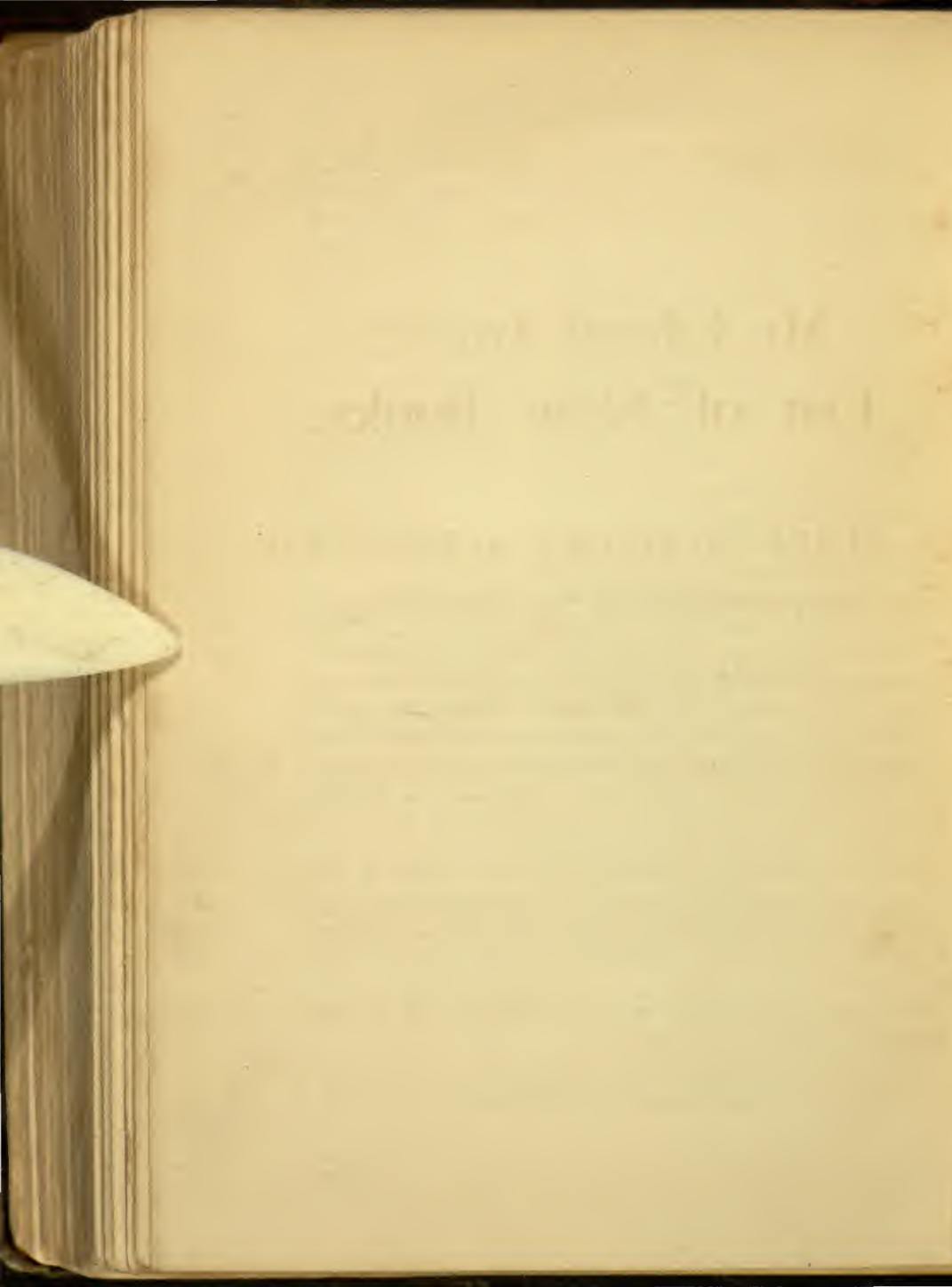
them with vengeful fingers, and thrust them into the reddest glow of the fire. Another instant, and the packet was in a blaze, and all the shadows fled hurriedly from the room before the onslaught of the brilliant flame. The dead woman's love and sorrow passed away in smoke, and with them passed away in smoke the last traces of the vengeance that Tempest Ladon had sold his sick soul to achieve. Barbara rose at last from the fireside. Her manner was full of triumph and decision. Now, if she had the sense to hold her tongue, as she had no doubt of her power to do, no one would ever know any dangerous secrets of the house, and everything would be the same as before, except for all the blessed differences made by the removal of her own deadly enemy.

'Now no one in the world can ever possibly find me out,' she said to herself. 'He never thought I should dare to do such a thing—not even for St. John's sake. He thought me such a ninny that I should simply sit and cry, and have fits of remorse, and send for the police to take me away. Why, even for Mr. Ladon himself, what I have done was the kindest thing that anybody could have desired. So why I should reproach myself I really do not see.' She took up the candle and prepared to leave the fateful room. As she passed the mirror, her own face, pale and ghostly in the flickering light, darted out of the gloom to meet her. She paused in front of it. 'Who would think,' she meditated, 'that you are a murderess? Yes, a real murderess, I suppose. And yet, goodness knows, I don't feel like one. I feel more like a heroine. How glad I am that all our troubles are over so soon!' Barbara went quickly out into the passage.

Mr. Ladon's room was dark. He lay upon his bed, one hand dropped towards the floor. He was sleeping very soundly, mercifully unconscious that all his plans had been dissipated by the unsuspected firmness of the woman he had

hated. But perhaps in the wide land where he was going he was able to see the futility of vengeance, and to be glad that his anger had been made of no avail. Slowly the long moments dragged on into hours, and his slumber deepened till he was merged beyond recall in the great profundities of peace. From beneath his bed crept the Lady Lisa, chilled by the midnight cold, and mewed to be taken up into warmth. Never before had he disregarded her appeal for comfort, but now she found him deaf. In the silent darkness she felt lonely and afraid. Then in the course of her wanderings she came in contact with her master's hanging hand, and was comforted. With grateful purrings she rubbed her head to and fro upon its unresponsive surface. But the hand swayed limp at caresses, yielding helplessly to her touch and making no reply. Puzzled and perturbed, she leapt upon his bed.

When the morning came, the servant found him sleeping the everlasting sleep that his tormented soul had so long desired. And upon his breast lay the cat, her two furry brown arms embracing his neck. Against the world she bore her testimony faithfully. The others had proved faithless to him, had flickered and passed away into shadow-land like the shadows they were—wife, son, and kindred. He had alienated all, and the fault was more his, perhaps, than theirs. But one he had not alienated, had never tried to alienate, and one soul among all the millions of the world was perfectly loyal to him in the end. And perhaps in this devotion that he had achieved lay at once the pardon and the justification of his dark and lonely life. To love is great holiness; but to be loved is holiness no less, and bears good witness to the immortal part of us, when at last we leave the House of Shadows, and pass out into the great Reality of Daylight.



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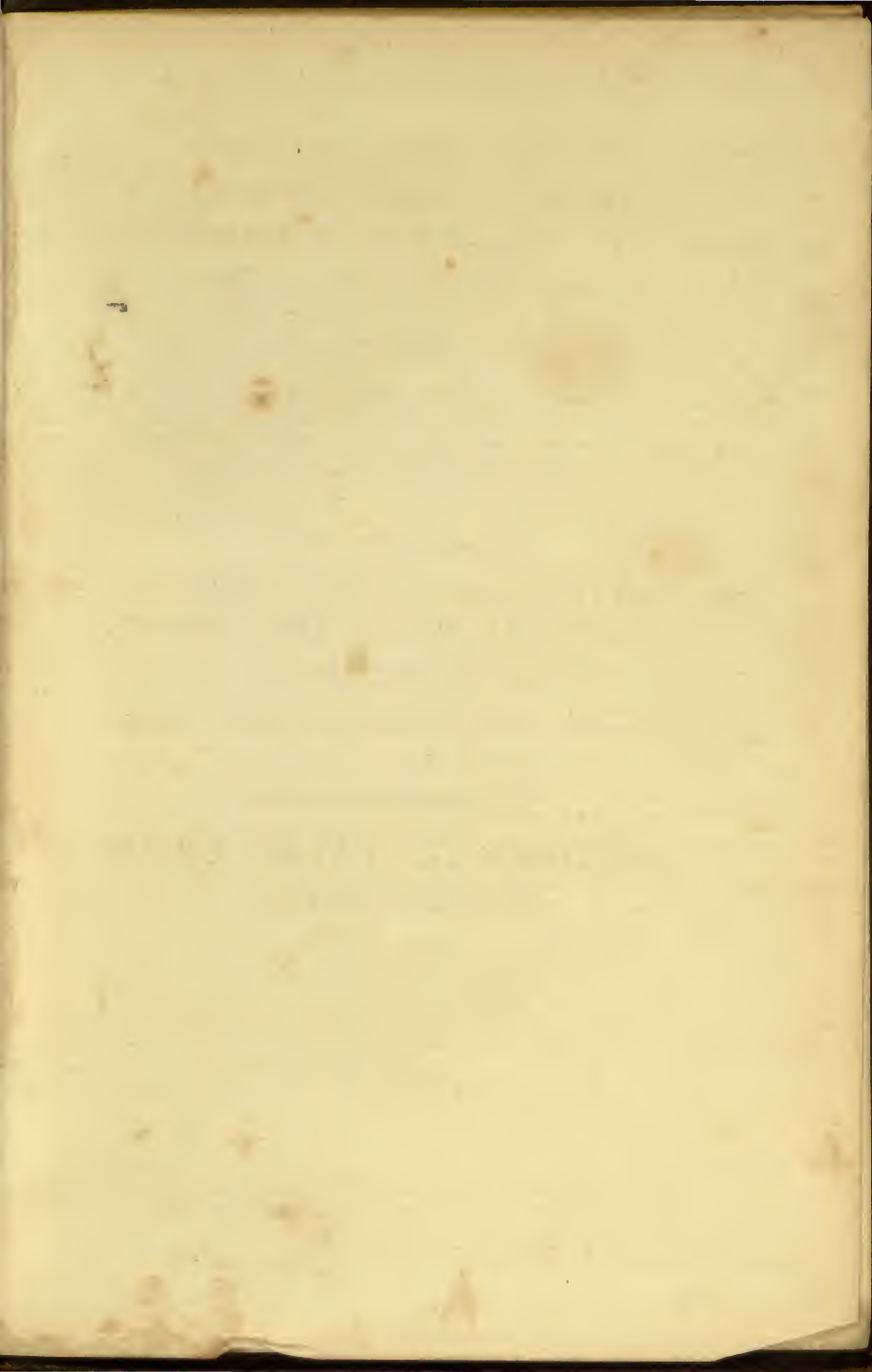
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